

PHILIPPIANS COLOSSIANS

The Letter to the Philippians

Date of composition: Written between A.D. 60-62, the sixth of Paul's thirteen letters.

Chapter 1

On his second missionary journey, Paul and his companion missionaries cross the sea from Turkey to northern Greece and travel ten miles inland to Philippi to preach the gospel (Acts 16:12). After a brief stay of only two to three months, Paul departs Philippi for Thessalonica.

Later, when Paul is under house arrest in Rome, the church in Philippi sends gifts to Paul, carried by one of its own, Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus delivers the gifts, but then becomes seriously ill; in fact, he almost dies. Epaphroditus regains his health and Paul sends him back home with his letter (2:25-29). Paul's letter is friendly, even tender, for these Christians who are especially close to his heart.



Letter writing was something of an art in ancient Greece and Rome.

Formal schooling would have included instruction in writing different types of letters. The more “friendly type” were considered simple and were known as “family letters.” Paul's Letter to the Philippians is this type. Note: Cicero, the Roman statesman and scholar, would not have approved of such letters, believing that true friends engaged in verbal conversation over such important matters. Paul's Letter to the Philippians is indeed formal, but also expressive of a deep friendship.

Paul urges the Philippians to stand fast in the one Spirit and to be **“of the same mind,”** and to act with humility, always considering others before themselves (2:1-4). Paul advises them to **“do everything without grumbling or arguing,”** or else they will discredit their witness of the Gospel (2:14-16). Indeed, Paul tells them that believers are to **“rejoice in the Lord always,”** because joy is about one's relationship with the Lord, which is an essential quality of the Christian life (4:4).

Paul and his companions (chiefly Timothy) consider themselves **“slaves of Christ Jesus.”** Jesus is the content and focus of the Gospel in which Paul, Timothy, and the Philippians are all partners, and Paul and Timothy are his particular servants. At the same time there are **“bishops”** or **“overseers”** and **“deacons”** (leaders in the faith), whose presence reminds the community of its place within the Church of Christ (1:1).

Despite the present difficulties, Paul urges the Philippians to stand firm for the Gospel. As Paul himself knows very well, his whole life has been taken up by the mission; and his imprisonment has only furthered the Gospel.

Though imprisoned, Paul is permitted to receive visitors and write letters. Of course, Paul prefers to be able to evangelize freely, but he also recognizes that God is using his imprisonment to promote the Gospel and to encourage others. This is especially true as the Emperor Nero becomes increasingly suspicious of the Christians. Paul is eventually freed for a time, but he insists that even if he were sentenced to death, he would accept it because it means **“to depart and to be with Christ”** (1:23). Still, Paul acknowledges that to **“remain in the flesh”** is necessary for their sake (1:24). Despite the threat of persecution, Paul and the Philippians can still rejoice in the Lord.

Chapter 2

Paul then launches into a narrative that is one of the most exalted and beloved passages in all of Paul's letters (2:6-11). In this *kenotic* (Greek, "act of emptying") hymn, Paul stresses God's true character, that God's love is fully manifested in the Cross. The humiliation of the Incarnation and the Cross is how Jesus embraced such a violent death. In Jesus, God has shown his true nature—taking the form of a slave and pouring himself out for the sake of his creatures. God *is* Love and his love is expressed in self-sacrifice—a cruel, humiliating death on a cross. Such divine weakness at the hands of his creatures is the scandal of the Cross. Indeed, the Cross is God's contradiction to human wisdom and power: the Almighty appears in human form and dies by crucifixion.

Paul concludes his hymn on a note of praise. As God's "Yes," the Father "**exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.**" Then Paul declares the full scope of the homage that Christ will one day receive: every knee shall bow to the authority inherent in his name.

Paul intends this passage to be the ultimate model of the self-sacrificing love to which he is calling the Philippians. Whatever Christian life is all about, its central focus is always in Christ. This is why Paul affirms, "**for me to live is Christ.**" The Philippians are to have this mind of Christ, so that they also bear God's image in their attitudes and relationships.

After the hymn of 2:6-11, Paul wants the Philippians to know about his own situation and to see to the advancement of the Gospel in Rome. Therefore he sends Timothy to see how they are doing, both as a result of their suffering and in their holding firm to the Gospel.

Paul then turns to the more immediate matter at hand, the return of one of Paul's helpers (and also the bearer of the letter), Epaphroditus. Paul is sending him back and commending him to the Philippians as one of their own.

With his concluding exhortations, Paul emphasizes the Philippians' long-standing partnership with him, and makes a final appeal for them to give themselves to "higher things" as they follow his example.

Chapters 3, 4

We do not know who the women Euodia and Syntyche were, but Paul refers to them as his coworkers who "**labored side by side with me in the gospel**" (4:3). In general, Macedonian women had a much larger role in public life, and particularly in Philippi, where they are well known for their religious devotion.

The appeal for steadfastness and unity brings the main body of the letter to a close. Paul then lists several virtues to emulate—truth, honor, uprightness, purity, what is pleasing or admirable—as virtues they have "**heard and seen in me**" (4:9).

Finally, Paul concludes with brief greetings and a blessing, which were typical of such letters at that time. Just as friends do not need to express thanks, neither do friends need elaborate greetings either. Excess words only detract from what Paul most wants to leave with them: God's glory, out of which he lavishes riches on them in Christ, to whom all glory is now due.

The Letter to the Colossians

Date of composition: Written in the mid-60s, the seventh of Paul's letters.

As is true of most of Paul's letters, his Letter to the Colossians was meant to be read aloud: "**After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea**" (4:16). Church leaders read Paul's letter in a public forum because the majority of the Colossians were illiterate.

Paul's central focus is on Jesus of Nazareth and his message: God has delivered human beings from sin and its powers of temptation, and reconciled the entire world to himself in and through Christ. The message is about the unraveling of the forces of evil in order to live a life of freedom in a new kind of community.

Chapter 1

Paul's letters are longer than ordinary letters of the ancient world. Typically, a writer worked out ideas by talking with his companions, composing drafts, and hiring at considerable expense a scribe for the actual transcription (while also keeping a copy or two for himself). This is likely why Paul includes Timothy in the first sentence of his letter. Timothy was Paul's companion on his second missionary journey. Finally, the writer must hire or find a letter-carrier to deliver it.

Paul wants to extend the Gospel to the Gentiles and thereby *expand* the People of God to include them. Paul's prayer is that the Colossians become filled with the kind of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding that will lead them to Christ.

Though the Colossians were not first among the Chosen People, Paul calls them "saints," thereby placing them within the Jewish roots of the Christian Church and into the story of Israel. Thus the Church becomes the focus of reconciliation for the Colossians: **"you were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds"** (1:21).

"Evil deeds" is a standard Jewish accusation against Gentiles due to their former pagan ways. But now the formally alienated Gentiles (Colossians) are redeemed, forgiven, and reconciled in Christ. By God's grace their evil deeds have been transformed into good deeds. This is Paul's theology of the efficacy of grace and conversion.

Paul's sufferings are not his own but Christ's for the Church: **". . . and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church"** (1:24). In fact, Paul's sufferings—verbal abuse, false accusations, expulsion from cities, attempts on his life, beatings, and betrayal by fellow Christians—are his apostolic "credentials." Yet even these sufferings are "lacking" because they must be imitated by all followers of Christ. Paul knows that his personal sufferings save no one; instead, they benefit the life of the Church through the proclamation of the Gospel.

Chapter 2

Since the defection of members and the distortion of the Gospel were regular pastoral concerns for Paul and his coworkers (Timothy and Epaphras), Paul issued a pastoral warning. Of course, Paul was not opposed to rational argument per se, but the Colossians were being deceived **"through philosophy and empty deceit"** (2:8). Christ alone is all the Colossians need because God has become manifest in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the narrative of his life, death, and Resurrection.

By **"fullness of life"** (2:10) Paul means the baptismal life of death to self. Baptism *is* their death in Christ—the forgiveness of sins and personal sanctification. It is not simply what they receive in this fullness, but to *whom* they are connected. "Fullness" is attachment to Christ.

Here Paul consciously connects the ancient Jewish rite of circumcision to Christian baptism. For Abraham's circumcision ultimately points to baptism in Christ, an action that locates a person in the one People of God. To be baptized is to be a member of God's family. Again, Paul is emphasizing God's mystery of expanding the People of God to include the Gentiles. As such, baptism is not what we do but what God does.

Paul and Timothy have the same aim: moral transformation by a life immersed in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Paul tells the Colossians not to let the Jewish Christians judge them, for they have died with Christ (2:20-23).

Chapter 3

The issue is that the Judaizers do not live as having died with Christ. However, by virtue of their baptism, they *did* die and rise with Christ. So the message for the Colossians is that they are to enter into what has already happened, and so break away from these false teachers. Paul goes on to list several vices to be conquered by the Colossians' death in Christ, and includes slaves and freemen on the same level of friendship within the Church (then a radical vision in Roman society).

Paul's use of "God's chosen people" is very much like the term "saints." In Christ the baptized are chosen, holy, and beloved and become part of the People of God and his mission. The Colossians must divest themselves of the ways of the flesh and clothe themselves with the ways of Christ: "**compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience**" (3:15-18). Love leads the virtues to perfection, but when virtues are pursued without love, they become distorted.

Christ's peace is at the heart of ethics for Paul. God is peace, so the Colossians are to pursue what leads to peace with everyone—Jews and Gentiles. As such, household regulations regarding husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves are not to disturb the peace but to shape and promote socially respectable behavior.

Chapter 4

Since Paul's mission is to bring together the new fellowship of both Jews and Gentiles into the faith, Paul urges the Colossians to pray "**that God may open the door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should**" (4:3-4).

The use of chains and stocks to secure prisoners was a tortuous ordeal. Rusty, heavy chains chafed and corroded the skin, sometimes leaving the prisoners crippled. When the prisoner moved, the clanging of chains contributed to the sleeplessness of the whole prison environment. Prisoners were also expected to obtain their own food. Those who could rely upon family, friends or other providers might have better prospects for staying healthy, while poverty and the need to rely upon prison rations often ended in disaster.

It was one thing for Jewish Christians to interact with each other, but quite another for Jewish Christians to interact with Gentile Christians. Therefore, from beginning to end, Paul is concerned that the Church's newest converts give witness to the charity of Christ.

Conclusion

Paul's mission includes a number of fellow ministers whom he values highly, addressing them as "dear brother," "faithful minister," and "fellow servant." Paul sends Tychicus to deliver his letter and to inform the Colossians about his circumstances, asking that they pray for him and his release. Tychicus is also to encourage one household in particular—that of Nympha—where Christians regularly gather "**in the church in her house**" (4:15). Finally, Paul adds his signature written in large letters, concluding on a characteristic note of grace with a short prayer of blessing: "**Grace be with you**" (4:18).