

AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILIPPIANS

(Dan Wallace)

Occasion and Purpose

As we can see, the occasion for this letter, if the above historical reconstruction is correct, is multifaceted: (1) it is a “thank you” note to the Philippians for their most recent gift, with a reminder that God will take care of Paul and them; (2) it is a response to the various questions and problems raised by Epaphroditus, including issues of poverty, quarrelsomeness, selfishness, as well as outside opposition to Paul’s gospel; (3) finally, the letter is a diplomatic reintroduction of Epaphroditus in light of the Philippians’ hope that Timothy would be sent.

Argument

Paul and Timothy greet the saints together with their leaders at Philippi (1:1-2). Paul continues with his customary opening thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-11). First, he thanks God for their participation in the gospel (1:3-5) and expresses confidence of their continued perseverance in the faith since God is at work in their hearts (1:6-8). Then he prays that they will grow in a discerning love (perhaps as a foreshadowing of his discussion of the opponents in chapter 3) (1:9-10), capping the prayer with an expression of confidence of their continued growth until the return of Christ (1:11). Thus Paul’s prefatory remarks are both a thanks for the Philippians’ involvement in the gospel—a sure sign that they are true believers—and a confident assertion that God will bring them safely home. The perseverance of the saints and the perseverance of God are thus plainly seen in this opening section.

The apostle now turns to his own circumstances, which the Philippians had been desperate to learn about (1:12-26). First, without so much as really giving any details so as to invoke sympathy, Paul boldly states that his circumstances have advanced the gospel (1:12). He is obviously more concerned about the gospel than about his own life and thus begins to detail the effect that the gospel has had: (1) the praetorian guard has heard the good news (1:13) and many have responded (cf. 4:22), and (2) other evangelists have been emboldened by Paul’s imprisonment (1:14). But some brothers have gained courage in their preaching for the wrong reasons, viz., namely to make Paul jealous (1:15, 17), while others are properly courageous (1:15, 16).

What is Paul’s attitude toward all this? First, toward the evangelists: he is pleased that the gospel is being proclaimed regardless of the motive (1:18). Second, toward Christ: he longs to be with him since Christ is his whole reason for living (1:19-23). Third, toward the Philippians: because he can still impact their lives he knows that he will be joined to them again (1:19-26).

By concluding the section on his own circumstances with a note about his continued ministry to the Philippians, he now, appropriately enough, continues his ministry to the Philippians! The real heart of the epistle is seen in 1:27–2:30 where Paul instructs the church in matters of sanctification. First, Paul draws on the political background of Philippi (viz., it is a free city) and encourages the believers to live boldly as citizens of heaven (1:27-30). Such bold living, in the face of (imminent?) opposition will be a sign to their opponents that God is both with the Christians and against their enemies.

Second, the apostle exhorts them to live humbly as servants of Christ (2:1-11). He appeals to them on the basis of membership in the body of Christ (2:1-4), reminding them that selfishness hurts everyone. Then he weaves an early Christian hymn (which they probably had sung many times) into the fabric of his argument. The Carmen Christi (2:6-11) functions as a reminder for them to follow in the steps of Christ: if he who was in the “form of God” could humble himself, what right do believers have to refrain from



doing the same thing? Further, after Christ “emptied himself” (by adding humanity, 2:6-8) God exalted him (2:9-11). The implication, if this is part of Paul’s argument, is that God will exalt believers who also humble themselves. (Of course, believers’ exaltation cannot compare to Christ’s since, in part, believers’ humiliation does not compare to Christ’s.)

This principle of self-emptying, other-exalting is then skillfully woven into 2:12-30. In 2:12-18 Paul exhorts the believers to live obediently as children of God. He first articulates the available resources—“God is at work in you” (2:12-13), then the effect such resources should have on believers—they should become blameless and pure (2:14-18). In this section Paul has encouraged them to obey and not to complain or grumble (2:12). Then he shocks them with the news that Timothy cannot return, but Epaphroditus can (2:19-30). The section on obedience interposed between the Carmen Christi and the news about Timothy and Epaphroditus is therefore no accident: Paul does not want them to grumble about Epaphroditus’ return (and Timothy’s retention), but to recognize that both men are following Christ’s example of humble service. A further implication seems to be that just as God has highly exalted Christ, so also the Philippians should exalt Epaphroditus (“honor men like him” [2:29]). Thus Paul concludes the section on sanctification with the offer of Epaphroditus even though they had hoped for Timothy, hoping that his audience will not be selfish, nor grumble, but will instead exalt and honor Epaphroditus.

Now Paul launches into a diatribe against the Judaizers, since he had gotten wind of their increased activity (3:1–4:1). Perhaps Epaphroditus had brought news of the Judaizers, or else Paul was simply writing a preemptive warning. What is interesting about the structure is that just as in 1:12-26 Paul first chronicled his own attitude, then the work of his opponents; now in the body of the epistle (1:27–4:1) he first deals with the Philippians’ attitude, then their opponents.

First, Paul articulates the basis that the Judaizers were resting on: the works of the flesh (3:1-2). He then points out that he would have a greater claim to boast in the flesh than they since he had the proper Jewish credentials (3:3-6). Yet Paul does not boast; in fact, he very graphically explains that the only thing the flesh can produce is dung (3:7-11; especially v. 8). The basis of his righteousness, therefore, is the faithfulness of Christ (3:9) and the goal is Christ’s resurrection power (3:10-11).

Then, so as to thwart any syncretistic tendencies among the Philippians which might have arisen (viz., the idea that they could be saved by faith but sanctified by the flesh), Paul explains that the flesh is still with the believer. Those who might claim perfection are warned that although that is the goal, one cannot attain it in this life (3:12-16). In this section (3:1-16) Paul has effectively condemned both the Judaizers’ view of salvation and their doctrine of sanctification.

To finish his doctrinal polemics, Paul offers himself as an example (3:17–4:1). Once again he speaks first of his own conduct, then that of his opponents (a pattern already seen in 1:12-26 and 1:27–4:1). The order seems important: our attitude and conduct before God should concern us more than the doctrine and behavior of our opponents. Although the Christian life is often portrayed as a fight, it first must be conceived as an act of worship.

Paul now concludes the letter with three exhortations, a note of thanks, and final greetings (4:2-23). He exhorts them (Euodia and Syntyche especially) to get along with each other (4:2-3), to rejoice over God’s provision without being anxious (4:4-7), and to think and act purely (4:8-9). Then he thanks them once again for their sacrificial help (4:10-20). In this note of thanks Paul expresses his own contentment in God’s provisions (4:10-13), tactfully releasing them from further obligation (4:14-18) since the giving had apparently caused so much hardship. Then to relieve their consciences as to God’s provision—especially if they were to stop helping Paul—Paul gives them the assurance that God provides for all his children (4:19-20).

The apostle closes the letter with final greetings and a benediction (4:21-23).