

Philippians (September 3)

Reading Philippians

A foreign-born man received his citizenship document from the hands of an imperial clerk as others might receive and cradle a child. To be born a citizen of Tarsus or some other city might stir a person's pride. But to receive Roman citizenship – that came with privileges, which a father passed to his sons. Roman citizenship elevated a family above the tortured rabble who could only hope to prove themselves worthy and free.

Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship when he first visited Philippi. As residents of a Roman colony populated by former Roman soldiers, the Philippians well understood and appreciated citizenship. Paul reminded the Philippian congregation that, through Christ, they had received citizenship in heaven. Christ's heroic efforts on their behalf allowed them to enjoy a manner of life worthy of his gospel.

Author, Date, and Place of Writing

The early church was unanimous in its testimony that Philippians was written by the apostle Paul. The many personal references of the author fit what we know of Paul from other New Testament books. It is evident that Paul wrote the letter from prison. Some have argued that this imprisonment took place in Ephesus, perhaps AD 53-55; others put it in Caesarea circa 57-59. Best evidence, however, favors Rome as the place of origin and the date as circa 61. This fits well with the account of Paul's house arrest in Acts 28:14-31. When he wrote Philippians, he was not in the Mamertine dungeon as he was when he wrote 2 Timothy. He was in his own rented house, where for two years he was free to impart the gospel to all who came to him.

Recipients and Purpose

Paul's primary purpose in writing this letter was to thank the Philippians for the gift they had sent him upon learning of his detention at Rome. However, he makes use of this occasion to fulfill several other desires: to report on his own circumstances; to encourage the Philippians to stand firm in the face of persecution and rejoice regardless of circumstances; to exhort them to humility and unity; to comment Timothy and Epaphroditus to the Philippian church; and to warn the Philippians against the Judaizers (legalists) and antinomians (libertines) among them.

The city of Philippi was a prosperous Roman colony, which meant that the citizens of Philippi were also citizens of the city of Rome itself. No doubt this was the background for Paul's reference to the believer's heavenly citizenship. That Philippi was a Roman colony may explain why there were not enough Jews to permit the establishment of a synagogue and why Paul does not quote the Old Testament in the Philippian letter.

Characteristics

- Philippians contains no Old Testament quotations.
- It is a missionary thank-you letter in which the missionary reports on the progress of his work.
- It is outstanding as the New Testament letter of joy; the word "joy" in its various forms occurs 16 times.
- It contains one of the most profound Christological passages in the New Testament (Philippians 2:5-11).

Blessings for Readers

Philippians reveals Paul's intense love for and joy in this congregation. The warmth he shows toward them is unique among his letters, since the congregation seems to need less discipline than others. He describes the Christian life in all its blessings and goodness, which come from the Lord's work in us.

As you study Philippians, the Lord will work in your life, transforming your mind to be like Christ's. Pray that you may receive the fullness of his joy in all circumstances and live worthy of his gospel. For your righteousness is through faith in Christ alone. Knowing him has "surpassing worth" (Philippians 3:8).