

Background Research Paper

The Epistle to the Philippians

Carla Jones

BE7404: Preparing An Expository Message

June 26, 2025

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	3
II.	Date.....	4
III.	Provenance.....	4
IV.	Authorship.....	6
V.	Historical Context.....	7
VI.	Purpose/Occasion/Recipients.....	8
VII.	Conclusion.....	10

Introduction

Letters are transformational when written in the right context for the right recipient at the right time. According to Charles B. Cousar, “While the most obvious reason for writing a letter in the ancient world was to communicate information, letters served a number of purposes.”¹ Authors of letters are responsible for each word they pen as they either empower, encourage, or discourage the reader. The recipient and reader of the letter is left to their own interpretation if such a letter is left without clear, unambiguous communication. In the Bible, there are many authors, but no author stands out more than the Apostle Paul. His remarkable letters were key to the upbuilding, admonishment, guidance and administration of the church. The Apostle Paul, once known as a persecutor of the body of Christ, becomes a bedrock for instruction and doctrine for the church. Imprisoned, chained, ostracized, endangered, the Apostle Paul practiced what he preached and persevered while becoming the world-renowned author of thirteen books in the Bible that would impress doctrine on the heart of the church forever.

Out of the thirteen books that the Apostle Paul authored, there is one particular epistle that provides reassurance, inspiration and support to the church. Written during the Apostle Paul’s imprisonment, the Epistle to the Philippians provides the body of Christ with encouragement to unify and walk out their faith journeys together despite the trials, tests and persecution that they may face. Led by conviction and supernatural promptings of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul pens the Epistle to the Philippians with love, joy, encouragement and pastoral leadership as He places unity and satisfaction in Christ alone on display for the body of believers. Never forgetting his purpose nor the purpose of his letters, the Apostle Paul never

¹ Cousar, Charles B. *Philippians and Philemon (2009) : A Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c2f7d3d0-925a-3f7a-8011-cbc3470c9a61>. Pg. 11.

ceases to point to the cross. Jesus Christ alone remained the center focal point of the Apostle Paul's letters and thus elevated the power of his pen that would last more than a thousand generations to come. *Providing encouragement to the church, the Apostle Paul pens the Epistle to the Philippians to promote unity and sound doctrine to advance the message of the Gospel.*

Date

The date of the Epistle to the Philippians is one of the most controversial discussions amongst theologians. Due to the fact that the date of this epistle is potentially dependent upon where it was written, retrieval of a factual verified date of this epistle would be considered complex. Internal biblical evidence suggests an estimated and assumed date that is anything but resolute. According to Todd D. Still, "Pauline interpreters continue to debate when and from where he composed the letter."² While the date of composure is uncertain, internal and external biblical evidence suggest hints at the estimated date that the epistle was written. According to Hawthorne, "a few commentators have contended that Paul composed Philippians while detained in Caesarea in the late 50s-early 60s AD (see Acts 23:33–27:2)."³ However, John Reumann argues that "the other location and date most widely espoused by interpreters for the writing of the letter is Ephesus in the mid 50s AD."⁴

Provenance

The second most controversial discussion is the Epistle to the Philippians provenance. There are three propositions that are proposed when it comes to the discussion of provenance. Due to the lack of having exact factual evidence to prove the provenance, the location of where

² Still, Todd D. *Philippians & Philemon: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ca7dcae2-3878-3167-b9dc-61f444addc9f. Pg. 14.

³ Hawthorne, Gerald F. *Philippians* (WBC 43; Waco TX: Word, 1983) Pg. xl–xliv.

⁴ Reumann, John, *Philippians: A New Translation with introduction and Commentary*. Pg. 14.

this letter is written is difficult to pinpoint due to the many different locations the Apostle Paul found himself in.

According to Hellerman, “Tradition places the writing of Philippians during Paul’s Roman imprisonment.”⁵ Though internal biblical evidence confirms that the Apostle Paul was in prison, the Apostle Paul does not specify the location of where he was during this penned letter. According to Still, “in writing to the Philippians, Paul refers to the *praitōrion* (Latin *praetorium*) on the one hand (1:13) and “the household of Caesar” on the other (4:22).⁶ Furthermore, according to Gordon D. Fee, “these two pieces of textual evidence have most often led commentators to conclude that Paul wrote the letter from Rome.”⁷ The determination of the provenance of the Epistle to the Philippians remains only suggested as conclusions are drawn through the use of internal biblical evidence.

However, Still states that he is presently inclined to think that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome in the early 60s AD.”⁸ Though the main proposition for provenance is Rome, Charles B. Cousar states:

“A second proposal for Paul’s imprisonment is Caesarea. Though there is no mention in his letters of his being imprisoned there, Acts does record an imprisonment in Caesarea just prior to his going to Rome.”

These controversial proposals also give way to discussion for a third proposition as well. Charles B. Cousar also states:

⁵ Hellerman, Joseph H., et al. *Philippians*. B&H Academic, 2015. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=32f65243-91e1-3dda-af4d-9c0716297003. Pg. 3.

⁶ Still, 14.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee (Paul’s Letter to the Philippians [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 34) maintains, “Against many who protest to the contrary, the natural reading of these texts implies a Roman provenance to [sic] the letter, in both cases.” So, too, David E. Garland, “Philippians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (13 vols.; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 12:178–79.

⁸ Still, 15.

“A third proposal for Paul’s imprisonment is Ephesus. While no specific mention of an imprisonment in Ephesus can be found in Acts or the letters, Paul indicates that he has been imprisoned many times (2 Cor 6:5; 11:23) and particularly refers to an imprisonment in Asia (2 Cor 1:8–10).”⁹

Authorship

Due to internal biblical evidence, it is perhaps undeniable that the Apostle Paul wrote the Epistle to the Philippians. According to Joseph Hellerman, “Nearly all scholars think Paul wrote Philippians.”¹⁰ The lack of contending the authorship of the Epistle of Philippians stems from Paul’s direct reference to himself in Philippians 1:1 as he clearly states his name. According to Charles B. Cousar, “Only rarely in the history of New Testament scholarship has the Pauline authorship of Philippians been questioned.”¹¹ Furthermore, according to Philippians 1:3, Paul writes in first person, again referencing that it is truly indeed him writing this epistle. Such clarity needs no explanations or scholarly confirmations of approval. Debates on the authorship of the Epistle of Philippians seem meaningless when referring to the internal biblical evidence of the letter itself. Kostenberger, Kellum and Quarles state in *The Cradle, The Cross, The Crown* weigh in on the Apostle Paul’s authorship this way:

“Most scholars regard Philippians as an authentic letter written by Paul. Scholarly acceptance of Paul’s authorship is so widespread, in fact, that an extended discussion is unnecessary. The reasons for accepting authenticity include (1) the letter opens with the words “from Paul” (author’s translation); (2) the early church accepted Paul as the author without dissent; and (3) the intensely personal nature of the letter.”¹²

⁹ Cousar, Charles B. *Philippians and Philemon (2009) : A Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c2f7d3d0-925a-3f7a-8011-cbc3470c9a61>. Pg. 10.

¹⁰ Hellerman, Joseph H., et al. *Philippians*. B&H Academic, 2015. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=32f65243-91e1-3dda-af4d-9c0716297003. Pg. 3.

¹¹ Cousar, Charles B. *Philippians and Philemon (2009) : A Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c2f7d3d0-925a-3f7a-8011-cbc3470c9a61>. Pg. 7.

¹² Kostenberger, Andreas, Kellum, L. Scott and Quarles, Charles L. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 638-639.

As a result of the scholarly evidence in the aforementioned, the certainty of authorship of the Epistles of Philippians shall therefore rest with the Apostle Paul.

Historical Context

The historical perspective of the city of Philippi is subjective because very little is known about the start of the city's humble beginnings. According to Still, "little is known about Philippi's history from the time the city came under Philip's authority until roughly the middle of the second century BC when Roman rule began."¹³ A fertile area, the city of Philippi became a thriving city that would prove to be significant over time. According to Kostenberger, Kellum and Quarles, "Luke describes [Philippi] as a "leading city" of Macedonia and a Roman colony (16:11-12; cf. 1 Thess 2:2)."¹⁴ With no culture pointing to Christ, the city of Philippi is often known for its practice of paganism. According to Kostenberger, Kellum and Quarles, "In addition to an apparently negligible Jewish presence, archaeological remains indicate that Philippian inhabitants worshiped all sorts of deities, including the Greek Olympians, uniquely Roman gods, local gods, gods from Asia Minor and Egypt, and the Kabiroi from the nearby Aegean island of Samothrace."¹⁵ Due to the variety of religions present within the city limits, Christians who would come to shine the light of Christ in that pagan environment would eventually suffer major persecution which encourages the Apostle Paul to write. After all, the Apostle Paul was well acquainted with suffering and persecution. The Apostle Paul would eventually use his pen to keep the Church of Philippi encouraged and pressing toward the things of Christ. Though Paul is not with them and writing to them, because the Apostle Paul is unified with them in suffering and persecution. Braving the consequences of sharing the Gospel

¹³ Still, 5.

¹⁴ Still, Pg. 7.

¹⁵ Still, Pg. 6.

message, the Apostle Paul selflessly takes the time to connect with the Church of Phillipi through an epistle that would provide them encouragement, instruction and doctrine because he knows exactly what they're up against. Brown and Perrin suggest:

“The religious landscape in Philippi at this time included traditional Greek and Roman religious cults such as those of Dionysus, Diana, Apollo and Jupiter; Egyptian and Thracian cults; as well as the Roman imperial cult.”¹⁶

The Apostle Paul's love for the church would bleed through his letter and provide comfort to all those graced with the opportunity to read it and hear it.

Purpose/Occasion/Recipients

When exploring the purpose of this letter, it is important to remember that there were many purposes for this letter. According to Brown and Perrin, “One purpose of the letter is the opportunity it afforded for Paul to acknowledge the gifts the Philippians had sent through Epaphroditus (4:10–20).”¹⁷ Furthermore, other purposes of the Epistle to the Phillipians were to provide pastoral care and leadership. Though absent in body, he was not absent in spirit. Still providing leadership from afar, the Apostle Paul does not hesitate to mentor leaders and lay members. To further prove this point, Kostenberger, Kellum and Quarles state in *The Cradle, The Cross, The Crown*:

“The text of Philipians suggests several possible reasons for the writing. It is important to note that Paul addresses both pastoral problems and personal concerns. Two major pastoral problems surface in Philippians. First, Paul had apparently heard a report of disunity among the Philippians, which included a specific conflict between two women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche. Paul urged them to be united and to live in harmony together in the Lord (4:2). Second, he sounded a serious warning against false teachers and their teachings.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Brown, Jeannine K. and Perrin, Nicholas. *Philippians : An Introduction and Commentary*. Dowers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=0ffdc2e5-fd8d-3d62-b366-8295ba81a254>.

¹⁷ Brown, Jeannine K. and Perrin, Nicholas. *Philippians : An Introduction and Commentary*. Dowers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=0ffdc2e5-fd8d-3d62-b366-8295ba81a254>.

¹⁸ Köstenberger, Andreas, Kellum, L. Scott and Quarles, Charles L., Pg. 645.

The Apostle Paul's words of encouragement would carry the Church of Philippi and also promote unity and love throughout the body of believers. The Apostle Paul's leadership shines bright through this penned epistle and allows for the reader to get a glimpse of love order, purpose, joy, unity and sound doctrine that would keep the church from being inundated with the false teachings that profoundly threatened their faith in the city. According to Brown and Perrin, "The letter to the Philippians is Paul's warm and celebratory expression of his affection and concern for his sisters and brothers in Christ in Philippi."¹⁹ Much like the Apostle Paul, today our Pastors and church leaders work to keep sound doctrines within their church in order to keep the body moving towards Christ and eternity. Leaders play a critical role in the success of those who are divinely assigned to their care.

In addition to discussing the Apostle Paul's leadership, it is also imperative to discuss his relationship with the recipients of his letter. As a leader, it is absolutely critical to have a relationship with those that follow you. Animosity must be far and unity must prevail or the relationship or any relationship for that matter will soon be under trial. Therefore, it should be duly noted that the Apostle Paul had a wonderful relationship with the recipients he was writing to as Brown and Perrin state:

"The nature of Paul's relationship with the Philippian believers is evident from both the tone and the content of the letter he writes to them. They appear to have a deep connection with one another, unmarred by antagonism and discord (e.g. 1:7–8; 2:17–18; 4:1). The Philippian congregation had partnered with Paul from the very beginning of their existence as a community (1:5; 4:15), and they chose to contribute financially to Paul's ministry a number of times."²⁰

It is the power of this relationship that makes the epistle all the more special to the reader and

¹⁹ Brown, Jeannine K. and Perrin, Nicholas. *Philippians : An Introduction and Commentary*. Dowers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=0ffdc2e5-fd8d-3d62-b366-8295ba81a254>.

²⁰ Brown, Jeannine K. and Perrin, Nicholas. *Philippians : An Introduction and Commentary*. Dowers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=0ffdc2e5-fd8d-3d62-b366-8295ba81a254>.

hearer. The Apostle Paul cared about people and he cared that they were taken care of. When leaders take care of people, the people will take care of the leaders. It is evident that not only did the Apostle Paul love the Church of Philippi, but church also genuinely loved him.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Apostle Paul's letter to the Church of Philippi would prove to be an informative epistle. Carefully informing the members of the church about his status during his imprisonment, doctrine, unity and his love and care for them, this epistle truly operates as pastoral guidance in the administration of the church in his absence. The Apostle Paul's loyalty to the Gospel is made known through every word. His genuine care and concern for unity shows his desire for the Church of Philippi to be on one accord. Desperately wanting to always point to Jesus, the Apostle Paul does so by ensuring that they find joy in their salvation.

The most important aspect of this letter is pastoral leadership. Healthy church leadership is vital to the success of the Kingdom of God as the body of Christ seeks to let God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This epistle is indicative that the Apostle Paul became a great leader and one that truly lived what he preached. Selflessly always thinking of others, the Apostle Paul used this letter to correct, rebuke, encourage and exhort. The Apostle Paul sets the tone for church leadership as he presents himself to be the epitome of a true leader.

Works Cited

- Brown, Jeannine K. and Perrin, Nicholas. *Philippians : An Introduction and Commentary*. Dowers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=0ffdc2e5-fd8d-3d62-b366-8295ba81a254>.
- Cousar, Charles B. *Philippians and Philemon (2009) : A Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c2f7d3d0-925a-3f7a-8011-cbc3470c9a61>. Pg. 11.
- Cousar, Charles B. *Philippians and Philemon (2009) : A Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c2f7d3d0-925a-3f7a-8011-cbc3470c9a61>. Pg. 10.
- Gordon D. Fee (Paul's Letter to the Philippians [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, Pg. 34.
- Garland, David E., "Philippians," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary (13 vols.; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 12:178–79.
- Hawthorne, Gerald F. *Philippians* (WBC 43; Waco TX: Word, 1983) Pg. xl–xliv.
- Hellerman, Joseph H., et al. *Philippians*. B&H Academic, 2015. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=32f65243-91e1-3dda-af4d-9c0716297003. Pg. 3
- Hellerman, Joseph H., et al. *Philippians*. B&H Academic, 2015. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=32f65243-91e1-3dda-af4d-9c0716297003. Pg. 7.
- Köstenberger, Andreas, Kellum, L. Scott and Quarles, Charles L. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 638-639.
- Köstenberger, Andreas, Kellum, L. Scott and Quarles, Charles L. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 645.
- Reumann, John, *Philippians: A New Translation with introduction and Commentary*. Pg. 14.
- Still, Todd D. *Philippians & Philemon: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ca7dcae2-3878-3167-b9dc-61f444addc9f. Pg.5.

Still, Todd D. *Philippians & Philemon: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ca7dcae2-3878-3167-b9dc-61f444addc9f. Pg.6.

Still, Todd D. *Philippians & Philemon: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ca7dcae2-3878-3167-b9dc-61f444addc9f. Pg.7.

Still, Todd D. *Philippians & Philemon: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ca7dcae2-3878-3167-b9dc-61f444addc9f. Pg.14.

Still, Todd D. *Philippians & Philemon: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011. *EBSCOhost*, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ca7dcae2-3878-3167-b9dc-61f444addc9f. Pg.15.