

Discussion Notes

Introduction to Philippians

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January 10, 2016

About Paul / Saul

The turn of events in Saul/Paul's life (the Damascus Road moment) show us that his life was not built on a cleverly devised fable. Such was the brilliance and influence of this man that something "beyond us" must have changed his life's direction.

- Saul (Jewish name, Paul to the Greeks) was a typical first-century Jew. He was abrupt but in context much more genteel than others from his time.
- His hometown was Tarsus, so he was an educated man of the city. Paul was urban.
- A Roman citizen, his family had some money. He also speaks Greek fluently, along with at least two other languages.
- He understands how to be cross-cultural. Philippians, as we will see, nowhere cites the Old Testament. Since the city didn't even have a Synagogue, why would he appeal to the Torah or prophets when his listeners likely didn't have these writings memorized? Paul is a good evangelist.
- He trailed under Gamaliel, one of the foremost Jewish thinkers of his time.
- Also a Pharisee, through and through. Paul was at the top of his class in his generation for knowledge and zeal. If he hadn't become a Christian we may very well still be reading him in the Jewish Mishnah and Talmud.
- Paul is granted grace and peace by Jesus on the road to Damascus, even though he had been persecuting Christians. This is what Paul's life is marked by and why he offers it in his writing so freely. We can only give when we have been given ourselves.
- Paul not only gets a gracious call into relationship with Jesus, but is gifted the opportunity to become an apostle, a messenger and partner in the work with God.

About Philippi

- The city is named for its founder, Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great's father. It was also the site of a number of important battles involving Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony, and later Octavian (Cesar Augustus) who made it a Roman colony.
- Philippi was therefore a little piece of Italy outside of Italy and privilege came with that. Great allegiance to the Empire and Caesar also came with this which we will need to remember later on.
- There are very few Jewish people there, not enough men even to establish a Synagogue.

- It holds a lot of retired legionnaires. Philippi had a strong military culture which may have made up some of the make up of the church.

About the Letter

- Paul's relationship with the Philippians goes back to Acts 16, where we read about some dramatic events. The first convert is a woman named Lydia who seems to host the church in her home.
- It is a friendship letter, meaning of all the churches it is Philippi who Paul might be most thankful for. Even though he spent little time with them they have supported him in his hardship. They also have suffered as Paul and the others left the city in Acts 16, but those who had converted stayed and likely paid the price.
- There are themes of suffering, service and joy. A great sense of partnership and service brings about this joy, and thankfulness too.
- Paul speaks truthfully but in love to them – as a good friend should be able to do.
- Christian friendship, because of letters like Philippians, shows us that friendship is not about demanding things from one another or using one another, but serving one another.

Discussion Questions

- What did you learn or find interesting/challenging/comforting about the introduction to Philippians?
- How do you feel we are similar to the church in Philippi? What might we learn from their relationship with Paul?
- What have you already noticed about the themes of suffering, service and joy in the letter?
- What will you put into practice following this introduction to the letter?