

The City

Ancient Philippi, in ruins now, was an important Roman colony near the Mediterranean coast of present-day Greece. On the main highway to Rome from Asia Minor, it was the political and commercial center of eastern Macedonia. The historic moments most familiar to us today were the defeat of Julius Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius in 42 BC by Mark Anthony and Octavius, the future Caesar Augustus; and twelve years later, Augustus' defeat of Mark Anthony. It was also where the Apostle Paul planted the first Christian church in Europe.

The Biblical Account

The story is told in the book of Acts, the historical account of the early spread of Christianity around the northern Mediterranean. According to Christian tradition, it was written by Doctor Luke, who first accompanied Paul to Philippi about AD 50.

The familiar account is found in Acts 16: Paul—joined by Silas, Timothy, and Luke—was preaching throughout Asia Minor, when he had a vision in which he heard a voice, “Come over to Macedonia to help us.” The group immediately set sail to cross the eastern Mediterranean and, on landing, headed for Philippi.

Apparently the Jewish population there was tiny and there was no synagogue, so they went outside the city gates to the river, where they expected to find a place of prayer. Among the women there was Lydia, “a worshiper of God...and a dealer in purple cloth.” She and her household became the first baptized converts in Europe, and she invited the men to stay at her home.

In the course of their stay, they were continually followed by a slave girl who harassed them with her prophecies and divinations. Paul cast the demon from her, angering her owners

who made money from her fortune-telling. They dragged Paul and Silas to the magistrates, who had them stripped, beaten, and imprisoned.

That night, an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, so that all the doors were opened and prisoners' chains unfastened. The terrified jailer fell down before Paul and Silas and asked the question, "What must I do to be saved?" The missionaries explained Christian salvation to the jailer's household, and they immediately asked to be baptized.

The next morning, the magistrates sent orders to free Paul and Silas, and the missionaries went to Lydia's house to encourage the small group of believers there before they left Antioch.

Paul returned to Macedonia, spending some time at Philippi, in winter AD 58 (Acts 20:6), in an effort to collect offerings for the poor, starving Christians in Jerusalem. He wrote about the Macedonians in a letter to the church at Corinth:

"We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia, for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints." (2 Cor 8:1–4 NRSV)

Paul's Letter

About two years later, after standing trial in Jerusalem and being imprisoned, probably in Rome, Paul wrote a thank-you letter to this beloved congregation. Apparently news had drifted to Rome that the Philippians were discouraged by his imprisonment; and in his consolation, encouragement, joy, and love—with its timeless wisdom and practical advice—we still find comfort and hope in periods of discouragement and loss today.

But Paul had heard other news about the Philippians that concerned him. There was growing disunity in the church. He warned them to beware of false teachers and leaders, and then he got really personal. “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” (4:2) He named two women who had had a disagreement, causing divisions in the church as people took sides. He told the Philippians that if they wanted to reclaim joy, they needed to be unified. Again, his wise counsel on the importance of unity and of community and his practical advice on how to nurture relationships are as helpful today as they were 2,000 years ago.

Like every good letter-writer, Paul sandwiched his criticism and concern, ending his letter as he began it—with love, praise, and encouragement, a message we all need.

The Author

While authorship of many books of the Bible is disputed, most scholars agree that the Apostle Paul was the author of the letter to the Philippians.

Paul was a Roman citizen, about the same age as Jesus, born of Jewish parents in Tarsus, on the southern coast of present-day Turkey. By his own account, he studied to be rabbi under the great teacher Gamaliel the Elder in Jerusalem. He was zealous in defense of his faith and was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. After a dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus, he became a missionary, spreading Christianity across Asia Minor and southern Europe to Rome. His thirteen letters are the basis for much of traditional church doctrine, ethics, and moral behavior. He was martyred in Rome, probably in the mid-60s, under Emperor Nero’s reign.

Note: I am not a New Testament scholar. I have attempted to provide a background to Paul’s letter to the Philippians for those who are curious to know more about the inspiration for my memoir, RECLAIMING JOY, drawing from my personal library, online sources, and lessons

learned in seventy-seven years in the church. My mother introduced me to Philippians in a very different context when I was a young child. I describe it in Chapter 26 of my memoir, as well as in a blog, [Content, Whatever the Circumstances](#).—Ella Wall Prichard