

MARCH 3

Paul's Financial Support

One of the constant temptations of Christians today is to so spiritualize the leaders described in the Bible that we give no thought to the practical concerns of their daily lives. The apostle Paul is celebrated as a great missionary and theologian in the earliest church. Yet in celebrating Paul the missionary and theologian, it is easy to forget such down-to-earth questions like: How did Paul pay for his food, lodgings, and travel? How did he afford his books and parchments (see 2 Tim. 4:13)? Where did he get the money to hire the scribes who wrote his letters? How did Paul support himself financially?

Where Did Paul's Financial Support Come From?

Many have speculated about this question. Some have suggested that Paul's family was wealthy and that he inherited sufficient money so that he never worried about

financial matters. Others wondered if, as a rising star in the Pharisee movement (Gal. 1:14), he married into money. Still others thought that if Paul had come by wealth either through inheritance or marriage, he would have been cut off from that income when he converted to Christianity. Any of these suggestions are possible, but there is no evidence at all in the New Testament to support them.

Yet there are some things we can deduce based on Scripture. For instance, three texts in Acts suggest that Paul typically found people to stay with. According to 16:15, Lydia, a dealer in the purple cloth prized by the wealthy in ancient times, and thus, financially successful herself, persuaded Paul to stay at her home in Philippi [FIH-lih-pigh]. The second text, 17:1-9, describes Paul's ministry in Thessalonica [thess-uh-loh-NIGH-kuh]: When Jewish opponents instigated mob action against him, they looked for him at a certain "Jason's" house, where Paul had been welcomed (v. 7). The third text, 18:3, states that Paul stayed with Aquila [AK-wih-luh] and Priscilla in Corinth. This suggests Paul often found people who would let him stay in their homes as he traveled on his missionary journeys. Yet he must not always have been able to do so; 1 Corinthians 4:11 indicates that the apostle frequently was homeless.

Acts 18:3 states that Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla because they all practiced the "same trade"—they were all tentmakers. An ancient Jewish tractate known as *Pirke Aboth* [PEER-kay ah-BOAT or PEER-kay ah-VOTE] quotes Gamaliel ([guh-MAY-lee-uhl], Paul's mentor; see 22:3) as encouraging his students to study the Torah and learn a secular craft at the same time. He declared that the work put into both would enable the learner to forget sin. (In fact, the *Pirke Aboth* goes on to say that the study of Torah without physical labor actually *causes* sin!) This meant that Paul had a skill by which he could earn money, and it is clear that he used that skill to support himself.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul declared that he had worked night and day to not burden anyone while he was there. He expands this claim in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8, indicating that he did not accept free food, but worked for it night and day. He used the words "laboring" and "toiling" to indicate difficult manual labor. He acknowledged in verse 9 that he had the right to financial help from the church, but he wanted to model hard work for them as a practice they should follow. It appears that Paul's pharisaic training influenced him to think that being busy working with one's hands was a good antidote to sin.

The issue of receiving financial support versus working for his own needs appears to have been especially important at Corinth. He emphasized in 1 Corinthians 4:12 that he worked hard with his own hands. The reference comes in a list of shameful things Paul endured, including hunger, inadequate clothing, homelessness, and brutal treatment. Although he insisted that he had a right to receive financial support from the Corinthians (9:6-12), he wanted them to understand that his refusal to accept money from them was so that he could offer the gospel free of charge.

Paul's refusal of money from the Corinthians when that choice required him to work long and hard hours in tentmaking is a puzzle to people today. Perhaps the common practice of patronage in his world led him to reject the offers from some Corinthians. Patronage was the practice of a wealthy person providing money for a traveling teacher, philosopher, or even actor in exchange for frequent, public mention of the name of their wealthy patron. Perhaps Paul rejected money from such Corinthians because he wanted to answer only to Christ.



The skill of tentmaking has been handed down for millennia by the nomadic desert dwellers of the Middle East. Paul was a student of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel, who encouraged his students to study the Torah and learn a secular craft at the same time. This meant that Paul had a skill—tentmaking—by which he could earn money when necessary.

The Generosity of the Philippians

However, there is at least one church that gave money to Paul, and gave it more than once. Philippians 4:15 declares that the church at Philippi was the only church up to then to provide Paul with financial support when he left Macedonia (the province in which Philippi and Thessalonica were located). Verse 16 indicates that the Philippians sent him money “more than once” while he was in Thessalonica. Second Corinthians 11:9 hints at another financial installment from Philippi, and Philippians 4:18 indicates that Epaphroditus [ih-paf-roh-DIGH-tuhs] had delivered a financial gift to Paul while he was in prison.

The generosity of the church at Philippi and some commonly-used words in Philippians raise the question of whether a special arrangement existed between Paul and the Philippians. In 1980, J. Paul Sampley, in a book entitled *Pauline Partnership in Christ:*

Christian Community and Commitment in Light of Roman Law, offers a fascinating possibility. Under Roman law, persons could enter into binding oral contracts in which both parties contributed something toward a common goal. The Latin term for these binding oral contracts was *societas* [sew-SEE-ih-tahs]. The Greek word used to describe *societas* was *koinonia* [koin-oh-NEE-uh], a word used widely in a non-technical way for sharing and partnerships.

Six times some form of the *koinonia* root appears in the short letter of Philippians. The letter uses financial and accounting terminology in several passages. It appears that at least one purpose of the letter was to acknowledge the receipt of the gift from the church at Philippi delivered by Epaphroditus. Is it possible that Paul and the church at Philippi had formed a *societas*, an evangelistic corporation in which the Philippians supplied the financial backing and Paul was the

preacher? The pieces are all there to support this idea.

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Think about it . . .

- ✓ Why might Paul be willing to form an evangelistic corporation with a church (at Philippi) when he refused to accept financial backing from individuals in Corinth? Why would it be less problematic for a whole church to sponsor him versus individuals in a church?
- ✓ What advantages were there for Paul to work to provide financial support for himself as he did at Corinth and perhaps in most places?

COMMENTARY *Philippians 1:3-8; 4:14-19*

Philippians glistens like a small jewel within the New Testament. One of the shortest of Paul's letters, it remains perhaps his most beloved by the church. It's not hard to see why. Memorable passages that encourage and challenge God's people burst out all through Philippians (e.g., 1:6, 21; 2:5-11; 3:7-14; 4:4-7, 13, 19). What's more, the letter shimmers with joy and affection toward a congregation that Paul deeply loved.

Arguably, Philippians is Paul's most personal letter. The apostle aired his inmost thoughts (1:18-26), told us his story (1:12-26; 3:4-14), and testified to his burning passion to know Christ his Lord (3:8, 10-11) and to make Him known. Paul penned this letter as the Philippians' spiritual father, having founded this church in Macedonia on his second missionary journey. Yet now his circumstances had radically changed. He found himself a prisoner, probably in Rome. His life hung in the balance (1:20-23). In part, he wrote to thank his friends in Philippi for taking care of him in prison through their representative Epaphroditus, and to assure them that his present circumstances would in no way block the progress of the gospel.

This letter, however, is not about Paul. Philippians is primarily concerned with the advance of the gospel and the formation of a local Christian community into the cross-shaped likeness of Christ. The church in Philippi faced both interpersonal tensions from within and opposition from outsiders. With the heart of a missionary/pastor, Paul tailored his reflections on the gospel to the real-life needs and circumstances of the church. Above all, he pointed them to the story of Jesus, as both the source of their salvation and the pattern of their lives (2:5-11; 3:7-14). In Philippians, then, we discover Paul's theological response both to his own situation and to that of this congregation of young believers. The result is a Christ-centered letter, which continues to shape God's people—including us—today.

1. A Partnership in the Gospel (1:3-8)

3 *I thank my God every time I remember you.*

4 *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy*

5 *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,*

6 *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

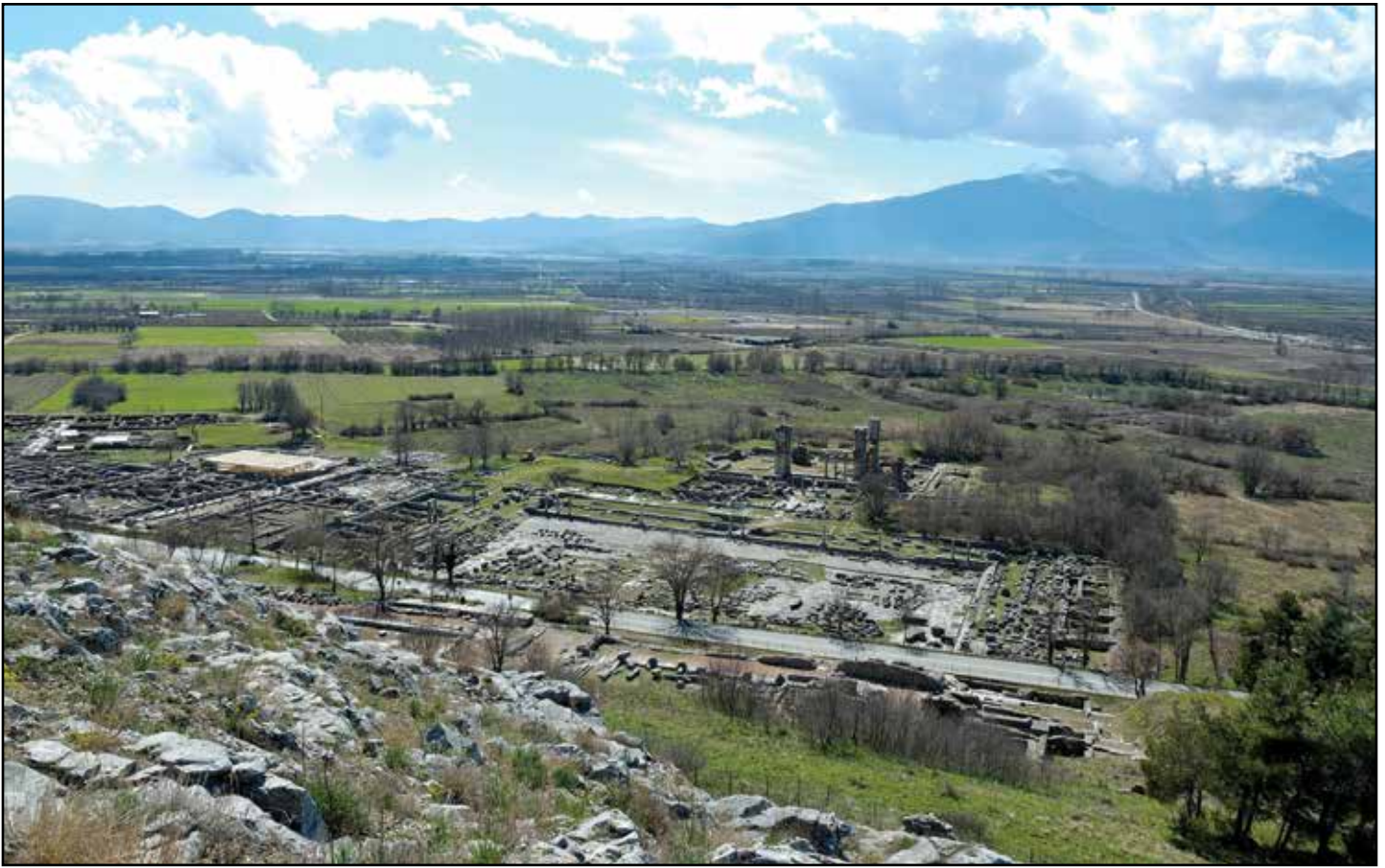
7 *It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.*

8 *God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

3-4. Paul framed Philippians with a pair of “thanksgiving bookends” (1:3-11; 4:10-20). He started and ended this letter by expressing gratitude to his dear friends at Philippi and giving thanks to God for them. This commentary looks at part of both of those “bookends.” Paul's normal practice was to follow his letters' opening greetings (vv. 1-2) with some form of thanksgiving, which we find in verses 3 through 8. This opening thanksgiving introduces some of the key themes Paul would take up later in Philippians, like joy (v. 4), the gospel (vv. 5, 7), and Christians sharing together (vv. 5, 7). In addition, it sets a positive, joyful, affectionate tone for the entire letter.

Paul's headline statement, *I thank my God*, begins one long and complex sentence in Greek, which continues through verse 8. Paul's references to his thanksgiving for the Philippians and his prayers of intercession for them spotlight the importance of prayer to Paul's pastoral care for the church. It is also striking that Paul made it his ongoing practice to pray for the congregation (*all my prayers, always*). *Always* doesn't mean that he prayed for them every moment, but that he did so consistently. Those prayers were characterized by joy, which is a key theme in this letter (see 2:17-18; 3:1; 4:4). In Philippians, joy doesn't depend on outward circumstances. Paul could experience genuine joy even as he languished in prison under a capital charge (1:4, 18; 2:2, 17; 4:10). Paul considered joy to be the hallmark of the Christian life. A joyless Christian makes no more sense than a waterless ocean.

5. The reason Paul could pray for his friends with joy was because of the *partnership in the gospel* they had shared with Paul from the start of his ministry among them. The word *partnership* (*koinonia* in Greek) includes both the idea of participating together in something as well as the relationship that flows out of that sharing. Here the focus rests on their *partnership in the gospel*. This local congregation



An overview of the excavated ruins of the city of Philippi. The forum or marketplace is in the foreground, with the remains of one of several Christian-era basilicas in the right center background.

actively shared in Paul's gospel ministry in various ways, including: 1) providing financial support (4:10-20); 2) interceding in prayer for Paul (1:19); 3) witnessing to the gospel in Philippi (see 1:27, 28); and 4) suffering along with Paul for the gospel's sake (1:30; 4:14). Paul and the Philippians shared an ongoing partnership in mission.

6. This gospel partnership demonstrated God's gracious work among the Philippians. Paul's confidence lay in a completely faithful and trustworthy God, who was committed to complete the *good work* of salvation He had already started. The emphasis rested not on the Philippians' "good works," but on God's saving work among them, which would produce transformed lives. The church's salvation was already in progress, but it will only be completed when Christ returns. Paul's confidence that God would finish what He began didn't mean that the Philippians' final salvation was automatic. Rather, he assured them that, whatever their present circumstances, God's gracious work would continue, both within them personally and among them as a body. God would not abandon them at any point on the journey.

7. Paul testified that his joyful thanksgiving for the Philippians, expressed in verses 3 through 6, was only right, given his deep affection for them. The NIV's *since I have you in my heart* is preferable to other translations that read "because you hold **me** in **your** heart" (NRSV, for instance; emphasis added). Paul carried such warm feelings for these converts, in part, because they were fellow participants in God's grace. The word Paul used for *share . . . with* is another form of the key term "partnership" that Paul introduced in verse 5.

In what sense were Paul and the Philippians "partners in grace"? The two preceding phrases give us a clue. First, Paul referred to his *chains*—his imprisonment. The Philippians partnered with Paul not only through the grace of giving in order to minister to

Paul while he was in prison, but also through suffering for Christ themselves. Second, Paul spoke of *defending and confirming the gospel*. This involved both answering objections to the good news and positively affirming its credibility. The Philippians had the privilege of participating in this activity as well. They did so not only by supporting God's gracious work in Paul's ministry, but also by standing firm themselves when the gospel went on trial in their everyday lives.

8. In an emotion-packed statement, Paul invoked God as his witness as to how much he longed for his dear friends in Philippi. This deep yearning, however, was not about Paul's feelings alone. It involved *the affection of Christ Jesus*. The word for *affection* in Greek originally referred to the inner organs (heart, lungs, liver), which were considered the seat of the emotions. In the gospels, it communicates Jesus' deep compassion for others (Matt. 9:36; Luke 7:13). Here, Paul said that he loved the Philippians with the same heartfelt affection that Jesus displayed. At the same time, Christ loved the Philippians *through* Paul. This reveals a three-stranded cord of love between Paul, his converts, and Christ.

2. A Partnership in Giving (4:14-19)

14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only;

16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

17 Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.

18 *I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.*

19 *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*

14. Near the end of Philippians, Paul wrote an extended “thank you note” to his dear friends in Philippi (vv. 10-20). The Philippians’ pattern of long-standing generosity toward Paul provides the “backstory” to this passage. In the latest chapter in that story, the Philippians had “partnered” with Paul during his current imprisonment (his *troubles*). This partnership came in the form of practical and financial help through their representative, Epaphroditus. In the Roman world, prison rations were meager and intended only for the prisoner’s bare survival. Such material aid from friends would have been vital. At the same time, showing solidarity with a prisoner like Paul meant that the Philippians themselves would share in the public disgrace that accompanied Paul’s chains.

15-16. Specifically, Paul says, the Philippians shared with him in the matter of *giving and receiving*. This is financial language, but in Paul’s world, it could also refer to social and interpersonal relationships. In that context, giving gifts to others often represented a means of social climbing or putting others in one’s debt: “I scratch your back; you scratch mine.” Paul, however, had a very different perspective. In Christ, the relative status of those giving and receiving becomes insignificant. The practical matter of financial support was transformed into a concrete expression of the three-way bond between Paul, the congregation, and Christ.

What’s more, this was a unique, long-term partnership. Because gifts often came with strings attached, Paul generally did not accept funds from local churches. Apparently he had no such qualms regarding his dear friends in Philippi. From the beginnings of Paul’s mission to Greece, he entered into an ongoing relationship of missionary support with this congregation.

17. Because gift-giving was such a sensitive issue in Paul’s social world, he added an immediate disclaimer—although he was grateful for their gifts, he wasn’t interested in milking them for his own financial gain. He did not solicit their gifts, nor was he indirectly asking for more. Rather, he desired that credit, in the form of spiritual dividends, be added to their own heavenly *account* (see Matt. 6:20-21; 19:21). This “interest” was worth far more than the original gifts.

18. Paul reinforced his gratitude for the gifts the congregation sent through Epaphroditus by stacking up three expressive verbs. He says, in effect, *I have everything I need (full payment); I have more than enough; I am filled to the point of overflowing (amply supplied)!* Then, suddenly, he shifted from the language of the bank to the language of the temple. Three terms—*fragrant offering, acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God*—recall God’s delight in Israel’s faithful sacrifices in the Old Testament. The Philippians’

generosity not only had enriched Paul; it also carried enormous value in the eyes of God.

19. The passage crescendos to a majestic climax with the promise of God’s working (see 1:19) and the praise of *his glory* (see v. 20). This verse expresses the divine response to the church’s attitude of gratitude. Paul says, in effect, “Even as you have fully supplied my needs (4:16, 18, emphasis added), God will abundantly *meet all your needs.*” In Paul’s social world, the receiver of a gift would normally be expected to return the favor. However, Paul rewrites the typical rules. Here it is *God*, not Paul, who would repay the Philippians, lavishing His immeasurable riches in Christ on them.

Using the highly personal language of *my God*, Paul speaks as one who has experienced God’s gracious provision. He could therefore confidently assure his friends that God would fully supply all their needs as well. Which needs does this promise concern? Certainly, the context implies that God would meet the Philippians’ material needs. Yet the mention of all their needs, as well as the position of this promise at the climax of the letter, suggest a more sweeping reference. God can be trusted to provide for **every** need the congregation might encounter: steadfastness in the midst of opposition and suffering (1:27-30); divine joy and peace as an antidote to anxiety (4:4-7); contentment in the face of adversity (vv. 11-13), and purity in a crooked world (1:10-11; 2:15), just to name a few.

The last phrase of verse 19 provides the key to it all. God has made His vast, need-meeting riches available to His people *in Christ Jesus*. Christ is both the source and the sphere of God’s boundless provision. We receive all the abundance of God’s lavish love only because we are united with Christ (2:1).

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An artist’s depiction of what the town of Philippi might have looked like in biblical times. No Greco-Roman town was complete without its theatre, the massive round structure on the right next to the wall. The Greeks presented theatrical performances that have their roots in religious celebrations. When the Romans took over the town in the first century BC, they redesigned the theatre to be more suitable for games and gladiatorial contests.