



## INTRODUCTION: THE LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Adapted from *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*

**Author and Date** The Apostle Paul is widely regarded as the author of Philippians (1:1). Several modern scholars, however, debate the unity of the letter as it now stands. Changes in tone and subject matter suggest to some that Philippians is a composite of two, or possibly three, Pauline letters that have been merged together into a single work. Attempts to date Philippians generally begin with Paul's stated imprisonment (1:7, 13–14, 17), and point to A.D. 62 as a likely date for its composition.

**Destination** Philippi was the leading city of eastern Macedonia (northern Greece) in the first century and held a strategic position on the Egnatian Way, the major travel route connecting Italy and the West with Asia Minor and the East. The city was named after Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. The Philippian Church, first to be established on the mainland of Europe, was founded during Paul's second missionary journey about A.D. 50 (Acts 16:11–40).

**Purpose** Philippians does not address any doctrinal or disciplinary crisis; rather, it is a letter of thanks and encouragement to a congregation of dear friends. The Philippians supported the imprisoned apostle through their constant prayers (1:19), as well as by sending him financial assistance by the hand of Epaphroditus (4:18). The Philippians had come to Paul's assistance several times in this way, acquiring for themselves a reputation as one of his most gracious congregations (4:15–16). Paul sent this letter back to them by the same messenger (2:25–30), to thank them for their gift, to update them on personal matters, and to assure them of God's rich blessings in return (2:25–30; 4:19). One concern that Paul addresses in the letter was putting the congregation on guard against Judaizing missionaries, who, should they make their way to Philippi, would likely pressure them to receive circumcision (3:2–3). Lastly, Paul wrote to prepare the Philippians for the arrival of Timothy (2:19–23).

**Themes and Characteristics** Much of this letter challenges the Philippians to grow in spiritual maturity by imitating both their Savior and their founding apostle. For this reason, Paul holds up Jesus Christ as the model of humility and selfless love and himself as a model of patient endurance.

*Jesus the Servant.* The example of Christ comes in 2:1–11, where Paul admonishes readers to serve one another in the Lord. To overcome pride and disunity, he summons them to live like Jesus by putting their neighbors' interests above their own (2:4). This calls for a spirit of sacrifice and humility (2:3). Inspiration for this is drawn from a poetic account of the humiliation and exultation of Jesus (2:5–11). Although divine and infinitely glorious, Christ freely "emptied himself" to become a man (2:7). He lived entirely at the service of others, and his heroic obedience to the Father carried him all the way to the Cross. This, says Paul, was so pleasing in God's eyes that he exalted Christ to the highest summit of heavenly glory. A similar inheritance awaits believers who tread the same path of suffering and obedience marked out by their Lord (2:12–18).

*Paul the Servant.* Paul is likewise a worthy model for imitation (3:17; 4:9). Though in prison, his apostolic zeal emboldens others to witness to the faith as he did (1:14). Though persecuted, his joy and optimism go forth to encourage readers undergoing their own struggles (4:4–7). Paul's confidence reaches its peak in his devotion to Jesus Christ, whom he is prepared to honor with his whole life, whether by preaching the gospel after his release or by marching to his death as a martyr (1:19–26). The secret of Paul's serenity is in the Lord, who sustains his spirit even in the most trying circumstances of life. He shares this secret with the Philippians, urging them to follow his lead by taking everything in stride—be it prosperity or persecution—confident that Jesus will supply the strength needed to live every moment for the glory of God (4:10–13).