

# Explorations in the Preaching of St. Paul



Week Four: Philippians

# The Background of Philippians



Part One

# Phil in the *Lectionary*



- ✧ Our Key Text (2:6-11) is used on two significant days:
  - ✧ Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion
  - ✧ Feast of the Triumph of the Cross (Sept. 14)
- ✧ 2 Sundays Each in Advent and Lent:

✧ 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (C)	1:4-6, 8-11
✧ 3 <sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent (C)	4:4-7
✧ 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent (C)	3:17-4:1
✧ 5 <sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent (C)	3:8-14

# Phil in the *Lectionary*



- ☞ 3:20-21 is an option for All Souls' Day. ("But our citizenship is in heaven.")
- ☞ Selections are also read on the 25<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> Sundays in Ordinary Time (A)
- ☞ Weekdays during the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> weeks in Ordinary Time (even years)

# Philippi: The City



- ✧ An ancient city in northeastern Greece located ten miles inland from the ancient port city Neapolis (modern-day Kavalla).
- ✧ While the city existed earlier, it first became significant when Rome conquered Macedonia in 168-167 B.C. due to its location along the *Via Egnatia* (a major ancient highway connecting Byzantium with the Adriatic coast with its ports cities that connected to Rome).

# Philippi: The City



- ✧ In the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., after the assassination of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Octavian (who would become Augustus Caesar) defeated Brutus and Cassius in two separate battles just west of Philippi (October 42 B.C.).
- ✧ In the aftermath, Mark Antony refounded the city as a Roman colony.
- ✧ In 31 B.C., more settlers arrived from Italy, and the colony was raised in dignity and was governed by *ius italicum* (Italian law), the highest privilege available for an outpost city like Philippi. (Cf. R.A. WILD, "Philippi", p. 795).

# Phil: The Background



- ❧ As a result of its favor in the eyes of Rome, many of the inhabitants of Philippi were Roman citizens (and Paul builds some of his message upon this fact).
- ❧ The city was very diverse religiously, with a number of different pagan gods (including those of the Roman, Thracian, and Egyptian mythological traditions). A synagogue was also likely present there (cf. Acts 16:13).
- ❧ Philippi was Paul's first stop upon his arrival to Europe on his Second Missionary Journey.

# Phil: The Background



☞ Acts 16:9-40 narrates Paul's first visit to Philippi:

☞ "During [the] night Paul had a vision. A Macedonian stood before him and implored him with these words, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, we sought passage to Macedonia at once, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. <sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas, making a straight run for Samothrace, and on the next day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, a leading city in that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We spent some time in that city."

# Phil: The Background



- ⌘ After a strange incident in which Paul drives out the evil spirit of a fortune-teller (thus hurting profits), Paul and Silas are brought before magistrates, stripped, beaten with rods, and put in prison. (Acts 16:16-24)
- ⌘ During the night, they are delivered from the prison by an earthquake. (Acts 16:25ff)
- ⌘ They leave after alarming the magistrates with the fact that they were Roman citizens (who had been treated illegally the previous day). (Acts 16:38-40)

# Phil: The Background



- ✧ Evidently, the church at Philippi is thriving and increasing in number, bringing Paul great joy (cf. Phil 1:12-14).
- ✧ Apparently (and quite possibly after the writing of Phil), Paul visits the Philippians again twice. (Cf. Acts 20:1-6; 1Cor 16:5-6; 2Cor 2:13; 7:5)
- ✧ They appear to be one of Paul's favorite local churches and his tender concern for the community is quite evident in Phil (cf. 1:3-8; 2:19-24; 4:1).
- ✧ They also appear to have been a very generous congregation towards Paul (cf. 4:10-18).

# Phil: The Background



- ❧ It is difficult to determine when Paul wrote Phil. Clearly, he wrote it while he was in prison (cf. Phil 1:7, 13-14, 17) and in danger of death (cf. 1:20-23; 2:17), but in what city? The answer determines the date of the letter.
- ❧ 3 Proposals:
  - ❧ Rome (traditional view, between 61-63)
  - ❧ Caesarea (cf. Acts 23:33-35, between 58-60)
  - ❧ Ephesus (during the Third Missionary Journey, between 54-56)
- ❧ While Ephesus seems most likely, none of the options can definitively be ruled out.

# Phil: The Backstory



- ❧ Although Paul's connection to the Philippian church is well established, the exact circumstances that led up to the composition of Phil are not well known.
- ❧ Was Phil originally only one letter? (~50/50 split among scholars)
- ❧ In any case, we can deduce a few facts:
  - ❧ Paul wishes to offer consolation from prison.
  - ❧ He also wishes to express his affection for the Philippians, even if he is physically separated from them.
  - ❧ He does appear to have some concern for doctrinal orthodoxy (cf. esp. Phil 3:2-21)
  - ❧ There was also probably a struggle for unity (cf. Phil 2:1-5).

# Phil: The Backstory



## ☞ Paul's Central Thesis in Phil:

☞ “And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception,<sup>10</sup> to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,<sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

# Phil: Literary Structure



- 1:1-2**            **Opening Formula**
- 1:3-8**            **Thanksgiving:** Paul tenderly longs to be with the Philippians.
- 1:9-4:20**        **Main Body of the Letter**
  - 1:9-11            General Thesis
  - 1:12-26          Descriptive Part: Paul Rejoices at the Progress of the Gospel
  - 1:27-4:20        Exhortative Part of the Letter
    - 1:27-2:18        *“Conduct Yourselves in a Way Worthy of the Gospel...”*
    - 2:19-3:1          *Travel Plans of Timothy and Epaphroditus*
    - 3:2-21          *Conformity to Christ (Possibly Originally a Separate Letter\*)*
      - (a) 3:2-6          *Polemic vs. “dogs” and “evil-workers”*
      - (b) 3:7-16        *Encouragement about Knowing Christ by Imitation*
      - (a') 3:17-21      *Polemic vs. “enemies of the cross of Christ”*
    - 4:1-20          *“Stand Firm in the Lord” and Rejoice*
- 4:21-23**        **Concluding Formula**

# Phil: Significance



☞ Phil is best known for two aspects:

☞ **Paul's Consistent Call to Rejoice (even in prison!)**

☞ Outside of 2Jn (only 13 verses long), Phil has the highest frequency of the verb "to rejoice" per word in the book in the NT.

☞ Epitomized in Phil 4:4 – "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near."

☞ **The Christological Hymn (our Key Text: 2:6-11)**

# Phil: Significance



- Overall, we can summarize five key themes that predominate Phil:
  - Rejoicing (even amidst suffering)
  - Conformity to Christ
  - Life and Death in Christ
  - Humility
  - Obedience

# In-Depth Text Analysis



Part Two

Philippians 2:6-11

(Christ: Obedient to Death)

# Phil 1:27–2:18



- ☞ **Key Text:** Phil 2:6-11 (The Christological Hymn)
- ☞ **Context:** Having just spoken eloquently of his own joy in the proclamation of the Gospel and his own hope in life or death (1:12-26), he now begins his exhortation to live in a manner “worthy of the Gospel of Christ” (1:27). Since God is at work in the believer (2:13), Paul centers his entire exhortation on the example of Christ (2:5-11).

# Excursus: Servant Canticles



- ❧ In Isaiah, four poems traditionally known as the “Canticles of the Servant of the Lord” appear
  - ❧ Isaiah 42:1-4
  - ❧ Isaiah 49:1-7
  - ❧ Isaiah 50:4-11
  - ❧ Isaiah 52:13–53:12
- ❧ *Example:* “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased. Upon him I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations. <sup>2</sup> He will not cry out, nor shout, nor make his voice heard in the street. <sup>3</sup> A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. <sup>4</sup> He will not grow dim or be bruised until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching.”

# *Excursus: Servant Canticles*



- ❧ A Key Question: Who is this Servant?
  - ❧ The Prophet Himself?
  - ❧ Israel?
  - ❧ A future Messiah?
  - ❧ Someone concrete (Moses, David, Zerubbabel, Cyrus, Jeremiah)?
- ❧ In their original context, these passages are written as a consolation to an exiled people and as poetry, may well be polyvalent in meaning.
- ❧ Ethiopian eunuch to Philip (Acts 8:34): “[A]bout whom is the prophet saying this?” (in reference to Is 53:7-8)

# Excursus: Servant Canticles



✧ In describing his and Christ's suffering, Paul appears to allude to the Third Canticle:

✧ *Example:* “My eager expectation and hope is that I shall not be put to shame in any way, but that with all boldness, now as always, Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.” (Phil 1:20)

✧ “The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint knowing that I shall not be put to shame.” (Is 50:7)

# Excursus: Servant Canticles



- ✧ In Phil 2:6-11, Paul also appears to allude to the Fourth Canticle in reference to Jesus:
  - ✧ “For this reason, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name [...]” (Phil 2:9)
  - ✧ “See, my servant shall prosper, he shall be raised high and greatly exalted. Even as many were amazed at him – so marred were his features, beyond that of mortals; his appearance beyond that of human beings – so shall he startle many nations, kings shall stand speechless; for those who have not been told shall see, those who have not heard shall ponder it.” (Is 52:13-15)
- ✧ Notice Isaiah’s connection between suffering and exaltation.

# Table Discussion



1. According to the hymn (2:6-11), for what reason does Jesus merit the title “Lord”? Who should profess him as Lord?
2. What implication does Jesus’ self-emptying have on the lives of Christians, including us?

# Phil 2:6-8



- 6 Who although in the form of God  
did not consider something to be grasped  
to be equal to God,
- 7 but he emptied himself  
taking the form of a slave,  
coming in the likeness of human beings;  
and found human in appearance
- 8 he humbled himself  
becoming obedient to the point of death  
even a death on a cross.

# Phil 2:9-11



- <sup>9</sup> For this reason, God highly exalted him  
and bestowed on him the name  
that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend  
of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should profess that  
Jesus Christ is Lord  
to the glory of God the Father.

# What's the Point?



Part Three

Actualizing and Praying Philippians 2:6-11

# Christology



- ❧ This hymn is foundational for the field of dogmatic theology known as Christology, the study of the person of Christ:
  - ❧ **“Low” Christology:** Emphasizes Jesus’ humanity
  - ❧ **“High” Christology:** Emphasizes Jesus’ divinity
- ❧ The hymn is probably the Church’s first attempt to articulate the mystery.
- ❧ How Jesus could simultaneously “empty himself” and be the “greatly exalted” as “Lord” was the occasion of many heresies in the Church’s first five centuries.

# Christology



❧ COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON (451):

❧ “Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity; ‘like us in all things but sin.’ He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity and in these last days, for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the virgin Mary, the Mother of God.”

# Christology



❧ *From the Catechism of the Catholic Church:*

❧ **472** This human soul that the Son of God assumed is endowed with a true human knowledge. As such, this knowledge could not in itself be unlimited: it was exercised in the historical conditions of his existence in space and time. This is why the Son of God could, when he became man, "increase in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man", and would even have to inquire for himself about what one in the human condition can learn only from experience. This corresponded to the reality of his voluntary emptying of himself, taking "the form of a slave".

# Christology



- ❧ **473** But at the same time, this truly human knowledge of God's Son expressed the divine life of his person. "The human nature of God's Son, not by itself but by its union with the Word, knew and showed forth in itself everything that pertains to God." Such is first of all the case with the intimate and immediate knowledge that the Son of God made man has of his Father. The Son in his human knowledge also showed the divine penetration he had into the secret thoughts of human hearts.
- ❧ **474** By its union to the divine wisdom in the person of the Word incarnate, Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal. What he admitted to not knowing in this area, he elsewhere declared himself not sent to reveal.

# Christian Prayer



- ✠ This hymn has become beloved in the Church's life of prayer because of its succinct summary of the key articles of the Church's faith in the Paschal Mystery (cf. CCC 2641)
- ✠ Used every Saturday evening as part of the First Vespers of Sunday in *The Liturgy of the Hours*.

# The Background of Philemon



Part Four  
Another Letter from Prison

# Phlm: A Brief Message



- ☞ Another Captivity Letter (likely written around the same time as Phil)
- ☞ Unlike Paul's other letters, Phlm is a brief message written to Philemon and a house church that met at his home.
- ☞ His goal was to appeal on behalf of an escaped slave named Onesimus, that Philemon might receive him back "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, [...] but even more so, as a man and in the Lord." (vv. 16-17)

# Bibliography

(in addition to the General Bibliography)



- ❧ *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*: “Philippi”, “Philippians, Letter of Paul to the”, and “Philemon, Letter of Paul to”
- ❧ WATTS, J.D.W., *Isaiah 34–66*, WBC 25, Nashville 2000<sup>2</sup>.