



PHILIPPIANS
THE CROSS - SHAPED

LIFE

4 studies for individuals, groups or 1:1

Welcome to Philippians, The Cross-Shaped Life

Philippians is a letter about joy and partnership in the gospel! It's a tremendous book to read with another Christian for your mutual encouragement, and for the strengthening of your church.

If you're using these studies in a **Bible Study Group**, try to make sure you've read the passage and done your preparation before you meet. This will be of great benefit not only to you, but also to the other members of your group.

If you're a **Bible Study Group Leader** please don't feel that your group needs to answer every question in every study, especially as some of these studies have lots of questions. There are different types of questions, including some which reflect on the same points from slightly different perspectives. Please choose the questions most appropriate for your group.

If you're doing these studies **individually**, why not let someone know you are doing so, and arrange a time to meet with them when you've finished (or even as you go) to let them know how your life is being changed by God's Word.

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Leaders' Introduction

In Acts 16:9 Paul received a vision from a man of Macedonia, who implored him, "Come over to Macedonia, and help us" (You may remember this from our series in Acts earlier this year!). Paul and his travelling companions understood this to be the guiding of God, in contrast to the closing of the doors to Asia & Bithynia earlier. This was sometime between 49 and 52 AD.

Philippi was a port city, sitting at the end of the Egnatian Way, the major highway from Rome across the empire. Luke describes Philippi in Acts 16:12 as "the leading city of Macedonia and a Roman colony". Unique in the Roman Empire, Philippi enjoyed special privileges as a city, including most importantly, the "Italic Right." This meant that the citizens of Philippi held the same rights and privileges as if their city were within the bounds of Italy itself. Some of Paul's language in his letter to the Philippians reflects the pride of the Philippians in their civic privileges, i.e. the "citizenship" language in 1:27 and 3:20.

The letter was most likely written in around 62 AD during Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Epaphroditus travelled to Paul with a gift from the church in Philippi (Acts 28), prompting Paul to pen the letter. See 'The New Bible Dictionary' article on Philippi for more background information.

Mark Peterson (formerly Music Director at Trinity Church Adelaide) released an album based on Philippians 'Whatever Happens'. www.markpeterson.com.au/albums/whatever-happens

Recommended Reading:

Philippians - Tyndale New Testament Commentary. Ralph P Martin

The Message of Philippians - The Bible Speaks Today. Alec Motyer

Philippians. F F Bruce

"Philippians, Epistle to the" by R P Martin. in *The New Bible Dictionary.*

Leaders' Notes

Philippians 1

To Live is Christ

Key verses:

1:9 - 11 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

1:18 The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Notes:

v 5 “Partnership” is the Greek work “koinonia.” Sometimes translated as “fellowship” but this word has become greatly weakened in English to mean little more than “spending time together.” The Greek word reflects a business arrangement; sharing in work and sharing in financial responsibilities. We know, for example, that the Philippians sent Paul a financial gift. Partnership is always “in” something; in the faith, in the gospel, etc.

v 12 “advance the gospel” - Paul’s language describes an advancement despite obstacles or dangers that would stop someone travelling along a path. Verses 12 and following sound like perhaps Paul is responding to an enquiry from the Philippians about his condition and well-being while in prison.

v 18 Note that Paul is speaking of the motives of other preachers, not the content of their message. Paul isn’t saying that the message is not important (see Galatians 5:12 for a clear example of that!). Their message is orthodox, but their motives are selfish. A trap for Christians today?!

v 19 “will turn out for my deliverance” - This could mean deliverance from prison, or Paul may mean his eternal deliverance. It’s likely that Paul has left it deliberately ambiguous to allow for both meanings, since this section 19 - 26, shows the tension between temporal and eternal salvation quite clearly. Paul is a prisoner for Christ, and at the same time, suffering on behalf of the churches!

1. A friend becomes a Christian and asks you to recommend a church in their area for them to join. What characteristics of a healthy church do you look for as you consider your recommendation?

2. If you found yourself in prison what aspect of freedom do you think you would miss the most?

3. Finish this sentence: "You can tell when I'm really happy because I ..."

Read Philippians 1:1 - 11

4. What do Paul's opening words tell us about his understanding of the identity of God's people?

5. Why is Paul so joyful?

6. In verse 28 Paul comments that the Philippian Christians are facing opposition for their faith. How is it that he can

“pray with joy” (v 4) when they are being opposed for their faith in Jesus?

- 7.** Paul’s word “partnership” in verse 5 reflects a business arrangement; sharing in work and sharing in financial responsibilities. In the light of that, what do you think “partnership in the gospel” between Christian people looks like today?

- 8.** What does Paul’s prayer demonstrate about:
 - his goal for the Philippians?

 - the means by which they might attain that goal?

- 9.** Think about your prayers for Christian people. What do you most often ask for them?

- 10.** Why do you think our prayers are often very different from Paul’s?

11. Write Paul's prayer in verses 9 - 11 in your own words.

Read Philippians 1:12 - 30

12. Imagine that verses 12 - 26 are Paul's "Handbook for Evangelism" for instructing the Philippians and us! What are the lessons in evangelism that we are taught in this section?

13. How does Paul respond to those who preach Christ from impure motives?

14. How is Paul's imprisonment and suffering good news for the Philippians?

15. What does Paul mean when he says, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v 21)? How is each option good for Paul?

- 16.** How is the promise of suffering in verses 29 & 30 an encouragement for the Philippians?

- 17.** What kind of opposition do Christians in countries in the West face for their faith in Jesus?

- 18.** Paul's longing is that "in every way ... Christ is preached" (v 18). What part can each of us play in seeing this become a reality?

- 19.** In verse 12 Paul's language "advance the gospel" draws on the imagery of a traveller advancing despite obstacles or dangers that block their path. What are some of the potential obstructions that the gospel of Jesus faces in our communities?

- 20.** Who are some Christians for whom you can be praying in the light of Paul's prayer in Philippians 1?

Leaders' Notes

Philippians 2:1 - 30

The Imitation of Christ

Key verses:

2:5 - 11 The Hymn to Christ

Notes:

v 1 This section begins with a "Therefore" (translated "So" in the ESV), connecting back to the section starting at 1:27. This connecting word is translated in the NIV 2011 but not the 1984.

v 2 There are 2 references here to the mind. Paul repeats this emphasis on other occasions in the letter, knowing that right thinking and right attitudes will lead to right behaviour.

v 5 - 11 are considered by some to be an early Christian hymn that Paul quotes or adapts for his purposes here. Notice that the NIV (but not the ESV) formats the text as poetry.

v 7 - This verse has given rise to much controversy and heresy over the years! Some people have taught that in "making himself nothing" Christ laid aside his divine attributes and was only a man during the incarnation. Of course, this is at odds with the context of Philippians and with the testimony of the rest of the Scriptures! Paul's point is that Christ considered his equal position with God and the privileges he held in heaven as worth laying aside to be born as a human baby and to die for his people. The whole point of these verses is that we might follow Christ's example, but that would be impossible if Jesus was laying aside his divine attributes as we don't possess those in the first place!

v 12 - We can never achieve our own salvation, but "we can and must live lives that show God's saving power that we have made our own" - Tyndale NT Commentary. Question 11 on page 10, "How much of Paul's ideal ..." may be seen by some as a chance to discuss all their frustrations and disappointments with their group, their church and their family. This is not the aim of the question! The goal is to reflect on Paul's exhortation - "be like Christ!" and to consider how we can each play a part in serving, loving, etc.

Verses 12 - 30 reflect on the practical outworking of salvation - not how to get into a right relationship with God, but how one lives when God has brought us into relationship with himself. Timothy and Epaphroditus, inserted into the argument here from a pastoral perspective, serve as good examples of this, as does Paul's own willingness to send them back to Philippi.

1. Were you ever told “You’re just like your father/mother”? What behaviour or attitude in you led to that characterisation?
2. Out of everyone in the world, past or present, who do you wish you could be more like? Why?
3. If you hear someone described as “servant-hearted” what picture comes to mind?

Read Philippians 2:1 - 30

4. For what purpose does Paul encourage like-mindedness among the Philippians?
5. What problem among the Christians in Philippi might Paul be seeking to address?
6. How do you feel/react when reading the hymn of Christ in v 5 - 11?

7. Briefly summarise the following verses in your own words:

v 5

v 6

v 7

v 8

v 10

8. “Humility” and “love” are two words that today are often considered to mean something completely different to what Paul has in mind here. How is Paul’s understanding of each word different to the prevailing understanding today?

- Humility

- Love

9. How might your life and relationships be different if you were able to put these characteristics into action in your life?

- 10.** We're often told that true happiness and joy can be found within ourselves or if we set out only to please ourselves. How does Philippians 2 show the error of that kind of thinking?
- 11.** How much of Paul's ideal of unity in verses 1 - 4 do you see in your own group/church/family. What stops this from being a reality?
- 12.** In the light of those opening verses, what does it mean to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (v 12)? What does it not mean?
- 13.** What is the relationship that Paul sees between sharing the good news of Jesus and living a humble other-person-centred life?
- 14.** From these verses what do we learn:
- shapes the Christian life?

 - is the shape of the Christian life?

- 15.** Reflecting on what Paul demonstrates to be his great hope for the Philippians, what is your goal for the fellow-believers in your church or Bible Study Group?

- 16.** What do you need to know/understand/remember in order to help this become a reality?

- 17.** How can we “shine like stars” (v 15) in our communities, workplaces, homes and friendship circles?

- 18.** Who are some Christian people who you look up to as examples of Christ-like humility, love and service?
How can you learn from their example and work out your salvation in Christ in the same way?

Key verses:

3:13 - 14 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Notes:

v 2 “dogs” is the description that some Jews gave to Gentiles. Here Paul turns it on Jews who insist on circumcision as a means of getting right with God.

v 4 - 6 Paul has as much reason as those in the circumcision party, these people who wanted people to become Jews in order to become Christians, for confidence in the flesh. See Acts 8:3, 22:2, 23:6, etc..

Note the contrast between Paul’s former way of life in verses 4 - 6 and his new set of values and priorities in verses 8 - 11.

v 7 These things that Paul had once counted in the “Profit” column as far as his standing before God is concerned, he now counts as “Loss.” That is, he’s not just ambivalent or indifferent to them, but he actually considers them as liabilities. His confidence in these things actually gets in the way, and makes the reaching of his goal harder. J B Phillips, in his translation of this letter called these things “useless rubbish”!

v 10 Paul’s new values and priorities are eternal and are grounded in the resurrection of Jesus.

v 12 - 14 It seems there were some in Philippi who thought that they had reached the pinnacle of the Christian life and maturity.

v 12 Notice also the passive language - “Christ Jesus took hold of me” and so Paul makes it his goal to make his own the purpose for which Christ took hold of him.

v 18 - 19 The cross stands at the centre of the Christian life, both because it is through the cross that we can be forgiven, transformed and welcomed by God, but also because the cross provides us with the model of discipleship. It seems that these “enemies of the cross of Christ” are opposed to this second aspect of the cross; their model of discipleship is not self-denying but self-serving. Interestingly, the circumcision party Paul opposes in verses 2 & 3 act as enemies of that first aspect of the cross, promoting a false alternative means of acceptability before God.

v 21 Note the reminder that we do not sit at the centre of God’s plans! It’s easy for us to imagine that Christianity is all about me, but it is in fact, all about Christ, and we get drawn into what God is doing in, through and for Christ.

1. Think of the people with whom you spend your life. How would they complete this sentence: "My goal in life is ..."
2. What is the clearest example you can recall of someone performing a complete about face in their priorities, values, or behaviour?
3. When the time comes for you leave your current group or church, what do you hope you have left behind for those who come after you?

Read Philippians 3:1 - 11

4. Why do you think Paul returns to this theme of rejoicing as he opens this section?
5. What is the issue that Paul is writing to guard against?
6. What differences do you notice between Paul's previous values and priorities (v 4 - 6) and his new values and priorities (v 8 - 11)?

7. In Acts 16:3, Paul had his co-worker Timothy circumcised. Is this at odds with Paul's statement about circumcision and related ideas in this section?

8. What then does Paul mean when he speaks of "confidence in the flesh" (v 4)?

9. In what ways might you be tempted "to put confidence in the flesh"?

10. How does having "confidence in the flesh" hinder our efforts to see the good news of Jesus go forward and impact people's lives?

11. What makes it difficult to shift our confidence away from our efforts/works/religious devotion and onto God's grace demonstrated in Christ?

Read Philippians 3:12 - 4:1

- 12.** In what ways do you feel the “straining toward what is ahead” (v 13) of the Christian life?

- 13.** In verse 13 Paul compares the Christian’s life to the actions of an athlete in a race. What other metaphor or image can you come up with to picture something of your experience of the Christian life?

- 14.** How does the image of “straining” and pressing on fit with what Paul has already said about having no confidence in the flesh?

- 15.** Where is the right balance between remembering God’s great acts for you in the past, and pressing on towards what lies ahead in the Christian faith?

- 16.** How do you feel about saying to other Christians “follow my example” as Paul does in verse 17?

- 17.** What might Paul be hoping to communicate by contrasting the two different destinies in verses 19 - 21?
- 18.** When someone needs encouragement to “stand firm in the Lord” (4:1) what do you think they need to hear and be reminded of?
- 19.** A friend asks you, “What’s the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian?” How do you answer, with regard to their:
- standing before God
 - beliefs
 - values and priorities

Leaders' Notes

Philippians 4:2 - 23

Partnership and Provision

Key verses:

4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

4:8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 4:19 And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Notes:

v 4 Without a doubt the Philippians were frightened by the opposition they face (1:28) and so Paul exhorts them, once again, to rejoice! For Paul, rejoicing isn't an empty platitude or simple encouragement, it casts the hearts and minds of his hearers back to God and to what he has achieved for them in Christ. Rejoice! Paul repeats the command immediately for emphasis and to underscore its importance.

Notice that Paul can command rejoicing! He understands true joy not as something that should arise and dissipate depending on circumstances. Joy comes from a reflection on and appreciation of God's grace, especially as shown to us in Jesus. Therefore Christians can be joyful whatever their circumstances.

v 6 Anxiety demonstrates a failure to trust in God's care and provision. The Scottish Baptist minister, Oswald Chambers called it "unconscious blasphemy."

v7 "Will guard" is military language, picturing God's peace as a guard watching over and protecting a city.

v 10 - 16 Paul remembers their gift to him and this gives him opportunity to speak about his trust in God and dependence

on God's provision, whether he has much or little, and also to address the issue of the blessings that come from generous giving.

Financial terms abound through this language of this passage; "fruit," "increase," "credited," "account," "full payment," etc.

v 11 - 13 Paul's three reasons for his well-being: contentment whatever the situation (v 11), adaptability to the situation (v 12) and dependency on God (v 13).

v 14 Notice that in giving financially, Paul says the Philippians "share in my troubles." Through their financial partnership, they participate in the spread of the gospel through Paul's ministry, which also becomes their ministry!

Paul's "troubles" cannot mean merely 'my difficulties'. His word is a technical term for the affliction or tribulation to come on the earth at the end of the age. The Philippians, through their giving, are sharing in the apostolic trials which are a shadow of and a reflection of the end.

Philippians 4:2 - 23 Partnership and Provision

1. Who from your past do you wish you could spend time with again?
Why?
2. What would the average person in the street say is the secret to contentment?
3. What makes you anxious?

Read Philippians 4:2 - 23

4. Once again, Paul returns to a familiar theme: rejoicing. Why do you think he returns to this idea in the final section of the letter?
5. If Paul can command rejoicing, what does this say about how he understands joy?
6. What evidence do you see that the Philippians are living in the light of the cross of Jesus?

- 7.** Consider the two women Paul mentions in verse 2. What might be the impact on the church if they cannot be reconciled?

- 8.** What makes it hard to heed Paul's exhortation to "not be anxious" (v 6)?

- 9.** How does the death and resurrection of Jesus give us reason not to be anxious?

- 10.** What kinds of things specifically might Paul have in mind in verse 8?

- 11.** What insights into the relationship between Paul and the Philippians do we gain in verses 10 - 20?

- 12.** What three reasons does Paul give in verses 11 - 13 for his well-being, even aside from the Philippians' gift?

- 13.** Paul mentions the “secret of being content” (v 12). In the light of what you’ve seen in this letter, what do you think that is?
- 14.** Why does contentment escape so many people?
- 15.** What does it look like to depend on “him who gives me strength” (v 13)?
- 16.** How is the financial partnership of the Philippians a means of them “sharing in” Paul’s troubles (v 14)?
- 17.** What spiritual reality is reflected in the physical reality of the Philippians’ financial gift?

- 18.** Make a list of all the benefits and blessings that will be ours on the last day, guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

- 19.** Who are those who have “contended at your side” for the gospel?

- 20.** How can you encourage these people to stand firm in the Lord?

- 21.** How can you be praying for them?

- 22.** What steps can you take to put verse 8 into action?

