

A LifeGuide® Bible Study
PHILIPPIANS
Jesus Our Joy
9 STUDIES FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS
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Getting the Most Out of *Philippians*

“Rejoice in the Lord always,” the author of Philippians exhorts us. “I will say it again: Rejoice!” Coming from most people, such words might sound trite and simplistic, but this is the apostle Paul speaking, a man who was not writing from a padded-leather office chair surrounded by books on how to be happy. On the contrary, he was a prisoner awaiting news that could result in his death. It isn’t hard to get behind the words of Philippians and see the tension and uncertainty. Yet through it all we see a man whose life is filled with joy.

As we study Philippians, we discover Paul’s secret: that a life lived for the glory of God will overflow with joy. What a message for our hurting world!

Philippi was an important city because it straddled the great east-west highway known as the Egnatian Way. The population of this city was cosmopolitan, being made up of Tracians, Greeks, Romans and a few Jews. In the center of the city was a large forum surrounded by temples, a library, fountains, monuments and public baths.

In 42 B.C. Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius near Philippi. In honor of his victory Antony made Philippi a Roman colony. This provided the Philippians with special rights and privileges as Roman citizens, and they responded with a great deal of pride and loyalty. Women enjoyed a high status in Philippi—taking an active part in both public and business life. Because of this, women also had important responsibilities in the Philippian church.

Paul founded this church sometime around the year A.D. 50, during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:12–40). From the letter to the Philippians, we learn that this church was taking us share of suffering (1:29); it was in some danger of division (1:27; 2:2; 4:2), it may have been leaning toward a doctrine of perfectionism (3:12–13), and it was threatened by the teaching of Judaizers—a group which insisted that all Christians adhere to Jewish laws and customs. Despite these problems Paul’s love for this church was obvious. He sincerely rejoiced at the progress they were making.

We know that Paul was writing to the Philippians from prison (1:12–14). Unfortunately, it is not clear which prison he was writing from. If he was writing during his imprisonment in Rome, then the letter can be dated sometime between A.D. 61–63. However, many scholars have pointed out that the conditions that Paul describes seem much harsher than what we know of the Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16, 30–31). It could be that there was an earlier imprisonment not recorded in Acts. A good case has been made for Ephesus. If this is true, Philippians would have been written about A.D. 54.

Paul had several reasons for writing this letter. He wanted to explain why he was sending a man named Epaphroditus back to Philippi. He also wanted to thank the Philippians for the gift of money they had sent and to reassure his friends of his

condition. Also the news Paul had received concerning the Philippians made him long to encourage and advise a church he loved.

May you learn to apply Paul's secret to joyful living as you study this warm and encouraging letter.

Suggestions for Individual Study

- 1.** As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.
- 2.** Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.
- 3.** Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author's meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. If you are studying a book, it will be helpful to read through the entire book prior to the first study. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.
- 4.** This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.
- Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.
- 5.** It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.
- 6.** Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.
- 7.** You may want to go on to the suggestion under "Now or Later," or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

- 1.** Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.
- 2.** Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to

discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study, you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

1

The God Who Pursues Us

Acts 16:6–34

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+16%3A6%20%9334&version=NLT>

An anonymous poet in the nineteenth century penned these words that have become a hymn:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No, I was found of Thee.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What do you remember about your earliest encounter with God? Did you pursue God, or did he pursue you?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. In what ways was God active in your life even before you responded to him?

Paul writes to the Philippians that he is “confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). In this study we will discover how God began the good work in Philippi. *Read Acts 16:6–34.*

1. If you had been traveling with Paul, what evidence would have convinced you that you were obeying the will of God?
2. What do verses 6–12 reveal about the way God guided these missionaries to Philippi?
3. In verses 13–15 God leads the missionaries to Lydia, the first Christian convert. Compare the way God leads here to the way in which he first led them to Macedonia.
4. What does this teach you about the methods God may use to speak to you?

5. Imagine that you had been present during the events described in verses 16–18. How would they have affected your view of these missionaries and Jesus Christ?

6. Why do you suppose the owners of the slave girl were unable to see God at work?

7. What attitudes and personal agendas have prevented you from seeing God at work?

8. Imagine that you are imprisoned with Paul and Silas (vv. 22–24). What sights, sounds, smells and emotions would you be experiencing?

9. What do you think enabled Paul and Silas to sing at a time like this (v. 25)?

10. How did God use circumstances in order to claim the jailer for himself?

11. How has God controlled the people and events surrounding your life in order to speak to you?

Thank God for the specific people and circumstances he used to move you toward himself.

Now or Later

12. This passage is a beautiful example of how the Spirit of God and the servants of God work together in evangelism. What specific principles of evangelism can you learn from this passage?

13. How should these principles affect your witness?

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

2

An Encouraging Example *Philippians 1:1–11*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+1%3A1%20%9311&version=NLT>

Have you ever listened while others prayed for you? If so, you know how great it feels to be assured that others care. Giving affirmation to friends can encourage holiness and spiritual growth.

GROUP DISCUSSION. As a group take time to tell each person in the group what character qualities you have observed in them and what you appreciate about them. Continue until each member of the group has been affirmed in this way.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. How does affirmation help you to become a better person?

Paul began many of his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving, but this letter begins with a prayer of unusually great warmth and affirmation. As you read this passage, imagine yourself sitting with Lydia, the slave girl and the jailer as this letter is opened and read for the first time. *Read Philippians 1:1–11.*

1. How would you have felt if you were among the Philippian Christians the first time this letter was read?

2. From verses 3–8 describe Paul’s feelings toward the Philippians.

Why does he feel this way about them?

3. What causes Paul to be so confident about the Philippians’ future (v. 6)?

4. Where do you see God continuing his “good work” in your life or in your Christian community?

5. What do verses 3–8 reveal about healthy Christian relationships?

6. In what relationships have you experienced the kind of partnership that Paul describes here?

What can be done to strengthen these relationships?

7. What are Paul's prayer requests for the Philippians (vv. 9–11)?

8. Why would each of these qualities be essential to spiritual maturity?

9. "Encouragement is the kind of expression that helps someone want to be a better Christian, even when life is rough." According to this definition, how would these verses have encouraged the Philippians?

10. What can you do through words, prayers and actions to encourage someone today?

Using Paul's prayer as a model, spend a few minutes thanking God and praying for someone you love in Christ.

Now or Later

Compare and contrast Philippians 1:3–11 with Colossians 1:3–14. What additional insights can you find to help you encourage others?

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

3

Joy in the Worst of Times *Philippians 1:12–30*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+1%3A12%80%9330&version=NLT>

There is nothing that will test our beliefs more than suffering for them.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Throughout history people have given their lives for such things as God, country, family, ideals, friends, love, science, adventure or compassion. For which of these would you be willing to die? What issues are involved in forming your answer?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. When has it been most difficult for you to have hope in the Lord?

In this passage we discover that Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison. This puts a whole new perspective on the joyful mood of the letter. While Paul is writing, he is experiencing what most of us would describe as awful circumstances. Yet even at a time like this, Paul's first concern is that Christ is praised. This passage can teach us how to honor Christ in a difficult situation. *Read Philippians 1:12–30.*

1. What things have happened to Paul that you would find discouraging?
2. Why isn't Paul upset by his imprisonment (vv. 12–14)?
3. Compare the motives of the two groups described in verses 15–18.
4. What does Paul mean when he asks, "What does it matter?" in verse 18?
5. When have you been critical of the motives or methods of other Christians?

What advice would Paul give to you about this?

6. What are Paul's considerations in choosing between life and death (vv. 20–26)?

7. What does Paul's statement "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21) teach you about living a life of purpose?

8. What does it mean to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel (vv. 27–30)?

9. Why is each of these attitudes or actions important, especially in the midst of suffering or persecution?

10. Look back over the passage. Summarize the various factors which can transform difficult circumstances into a joyful, Christ-exalting situation.

11. What are the most difficult circumstances you are presently facing?

How can Christ be exalted in that situation?

Pray that Christ will be honored in the difficult circumstances you face. Pray also for Christians around the world who are being persecuted for their faith.

Now or Later

Study Romans 8:17–30 to learn more of Paul's attitude toward suffering.

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

4

The Path of Humility *Philippians 2:1–18*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+2%3A1%E2%80%9318&version=NLT>

We speak often of what we deserve to get in life. The idea that we should be rewarded for our actions is ingrained in Western culture. More than any other person who has lived, Jesus Christ deserved to be glorified, but was willing to be treated as a servant.

GROUP DISCUSSION. How would your life be different if Christ had not come? As each member of the group takes a turn at answering this question, think especially about such areas as purpose, motivation, relationships, behavior and desires.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. In what ways has Christ been your servant?

In this study Paul asks us to imitate Christ in his humility by taking on the attitude of a servant. *Read Philippians 2:1–18.*

1. If you had been in Christ’s position, what would you have found most demeaning about serving humans?

2. How does Paul define humility in verses 1–4?

3. What does Paul mean when he says that Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (v. 6)?

4. How would Christ’s mission have been different if he had grasped for equality?

5. In what areas of your life are you most tempted to seek honor and selfish ambition?

How does Christ’s example teach you to respond to these temptations?

6. In your own words describe God’s response to Jesus’ humility (vv. 9–11).

What does this teach about their relationship?

7. What motivation does Paul give you in this passage for living a life of service?

8. In verses 12–13 Paul says you are to “work out your salvation” because God “works in you.” How are these ideas related?

9. How are we to be different from the “crooked and depraved generation” in which we live (vv. 14–16)?

10. Paul admits that he hopes to boast when Christ returns (v. 16). Why isn’t this conceit?

11. How is Paul himself an example of the principles described in this passage (vv. 16–18)?

12. What opportunities will you have for humble service during the next few days?

Pray about both the ways you are tempted to be conceited and the opportunities you have to serve.

Now or Later

Read John 13:12–17. If you are in a group, using a basin of water and a towel, take turns washing each other’s feet.

If you are not in a group, reflect on ways that we can serve each other similarly today. Put one of these ideas into practice.

Getting the Most Out of *Philippians*

5

Servants of Christ ***Philippians 2:19–30***

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+2%3A19%20%9330&version=NLT>

A grade-school teacher who praised your writing; a Sunday school teacher who prompted you to read the Bible on your own; a coach who gave you confidence in your athletic ability: each of us has been shaped and influenced by the examples of teachers, coaches, friends, pastors and mentors.

GROUP DISCUSSION. On a sheet of paper draw a picture that represents the most unforgettable Christian you have met. Take time for each artist to describe his or her drawing.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What other Christians have been influential in your life?

When the Philippians heard that Paul was in prison, they sent one of their members—a man named Epaphroditus—to Paul with a gift of money. It was his job to help Paul in any way necessary. Epaphroditus returned home carrying the letter to the Philippians. In this section of the letter Paul outlines his future plans and explains why he is sending Epaphroditus back. The passage gives several beautiful examples of Christian service as displayed in the lives of Timothy, Epaphroditus, Paul and the Philippians. *Read Philippians 2:19–30.*

1. Which of the godly men mentioned in these verses would you most like to meet: Paul, Timothy or Epaphroditus?

What would you talk about?

2. How is Timothy an example of the Christlike attitude considered in the previous study (vv. 1–11)?

3. Why do you think people like Timothy are so rare (v. 20)?

4. Imagine that Timothy is being sent to visit your church or fellowship group. What might he do to help you?

5. Since Timothy won't be coming to visit, what are some practical ways you could follow his example?

6. Why is Paul sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi (vv. 25–28)?

7. How is Christ's attitude evident in the relationships among Paul, Epaphroditus and the Philippians (vv. 25–30)?

8. Why is it important to honor people like Epaphroditus?

9. How can you honor the unforgettable Christians you described at the beginning of this study?

10. Examine your plans and goals during the coming week. How can you bring your own interests into closer harmony with those of Jesus Christ?

11. What are some practical ways you can serve those around you during the coming week?

Thank God for those who have been a godly example in your life. Pray that Christ will continue to give you the heart of a servant.

Now or Later

Make plans to honor a pastor, teacher or leader who has unselfishly served you.

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

6

Rejoice in the Lord *Philippians 3:1–11*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+3%3A1%20%80%9311&version=NLT>

St. John of the Cross declared, “The well-known joy of a Christian is not a denial of tears, but an affirmation of that which is deeper than tears.”

GROUP DISCUSSION. Describe the most joyful day of your life. What made it so joyful?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What factors under your control prevent all your days from being joyful?

In these verses Paul contrasts his old life of misery with his new life of rejoicing, and he invites us to join him in joy. *Read Philippians 3:1–11.*

1. What has Paul found that brings joy, and what has he found that destroys joy?

2. What would the old Paul (vv. 4–6) have been like as a friend?

3. Why is Paul so stern in his warning against the kind of person he used to be (vv. 2–3)?

4. If friends were to write references for your résumé, what would they say to convince prospective employers that you are a good person?

5. Why does Paul consider his résumé (and yours) to be “rubbish” (v. 8)?

6. In verse 6 Paul speaks of “legalistic righteousness.” What legalisms are today’s Christians pressured to keep?

7. How do these legalisms get in the way of knowing Christ and rejoicing in the Lord?

8. How does the new Paul (vv. 7–11) differ from the old?

How have his reasons for confidence changed?

9. What are Paul's goals in life?

10. How are suffering and death involved in helping us to know Christ (v. 10)?

11. How has following Christ been costly for you?

How have your sacrifices produced joy in your life?

Pray that you may experience a life of joy that is derived from a right relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now or Later

Paul uses the words *joy* and *rejoice* many times in Philippians. Read Philippians 1:4, 18; 2:2, 17; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10 looking for Paul's reasons for joy. What additional reasons can you find to rejoice?

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

7

Onward to the Goal *Philippians 3:12–4:1*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+3%3A12%20%934%3A1&version=NT>

The primary goals in your life can be identified by the things you dream about, plan for, work for, save for and aim for.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What have been your two or three primary goals, and what have you done to achieve them?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. If someone had been observing you during the past week, what would they conclude were your primary goals?

Paul uses the language of an athlete preparing for the biggest race of his life as he describes his dedication to reaching heaven. In this study Paul will act as our coach, challenging us to his high level of devotion to spiritual goals. *Read Philippians 3:12–4:1.*

1. Describe the people you think Paul had in mind as he wrote.
2. Paul compares his quest for heaven to a race. What are the similarities?
3. How can looking back distract us from running the Christian race (v. 13)?
4. What is behind you that you need to forget in order to strain toward the things ahead?
5. What are you presently doing that could be described as “straining toward heaven”?
6. Why is Paul so confident about his views (vv. 15–16)?
7. How does God make our errors clear to us?

8. In verses 17–21 Paul contrasts the game plan of Christians with “enemies of the cross.” What are the differences in goals and destiny?

9. What lesser goals have sidetracked you from working toward your real purpose?

10. In verse 17 Paul is like a coach calling his team to follow his example. Summarize the tips the coach has given us in this passage.

11. In what specific ways can you begin to follow Paul’s example more fully?

Pray that God will help you to focus on the heavenly goal and not be sidetracked by temptations.

Now or Later

Read Matthew 13:44–46. Why are the people in these parables so willing to sell all that they have?

In what ways is Paul like the pearl merchant?

What might you have to sell in order to gain the pearl?

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

8

Stress-free Living *Philippians 4:2–9*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+4%3A2%80%939&version=NLT>

Stress has been identified as one of the great killers of our day. It causes physical problems such as high blood pressure, headaches and ulcers, as well as emotional problems like depression, irritability and burnout.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Draw a graph showing the levels of stress in your life from birth until the present. Share your graph with your group and tell how the periods of greatest stress have affected you.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What has your experience of God been like during your times of greatest stress?

Paul was living with many powerful stressors (he was in prison, facing possible execution while defending himself against critics and heretics inside the church), yet he seemed to be strangely at peace. In this study Paul reveals some of the secrets of his peace. *Read Philippians 4:2–9.*

1. What were some of the factors causing stress in the Philippian church?

Which of these has caused stress in your relationships? How?

2. In verse 2 Paul pleads with Euodia and Syntyche “to agree with each other in the Lord.” What effect do you think their broken relationship was having on the rest of the church?

3. What might a “loyal yokefellow” do to help these women (v. 3)?

4. What should be your response to disagreements within your church or fellowship group?

5. How can rejoicing help to defuse a stressful situation (v. 4)?
6. How can gentleness be made “evident to all” (v. 5)?
7. What should be the role of prayer in our lives (vv. 6–7)?
8. What results of prayer does Paul promise?
9. How can true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy thoughts help cleanse our minds and restore our tranquility (v. 8)?
10. What helps you to control your thoughts?
11. In verse 9 Paul tells us that the God of peace will be with us as we practice what we have learned. What have you learned in this passage that you need to put into practice?

Pray that God will teach you to control the stressors that rob you of his joy.

Now or Later

Read James 4:1–12. What alternatives to fighting and quarreling does James suggest?

Using James’s counsel, formulate the advice you would offer to Euodia and Syntyche if you were in the role of “loyal yokefellow.”

How can your advice to Euodia and Syntyche be applied to your own life?

Getting the Most Out of Philippians

9

A Guide for Giving *Philippians 4:10–23*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+4%3A10%20%80%9323&version=NLT>

Giving is a privilege of every Christian—no matter how much we have. Making biblical choices in our giving is a big responsibility that can bring great joy into our lives.

GROUP DISCUSSION. If you had a million dollars to use for God's work, how would you spend it? Why would you choose to spend it in this way?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. How have you grown as a steward of the resources God has given you?

Thank you notes usually include rather conventional phrases about the thankfulness of the recipient and the thoughtfulness of the giver. In Philippians 4 Paul thanks the Philippians for a gift of money they sent. However, it is a most unusual thank you note. First he breaks the conventional rules by waiting until the very end of the letter to say thank you. Then he writes as though he didn't really need the gift! *Read Philippians 4:10–23.*

1. What things does Paul find pleasing about the Philippians' gift?
2. Why is Paul so careful to let the Philippians know that he isn't dependent on their gift (vv. 11–13)?
3. What is Paul's "secret of being content" (v. 12)?
4. How did Paul learn this secret?
5. In what situations are you least likely to be content?

How can Paul's secret be applied to your situation?

6. How had the Philippians helped Paul both in the past and the present (vv. 14–18)?

7. What opportunities do you have to meet the needs of those whose ministries require special support?

8. What benefits does Paul expect the Philippians to receive from their giving (vv. 17–19)?

9. How can the promise of verse 19 encourage us to give to the needs of others?

10. Many people complain that missionaries are always asking for money. How does this passage provide a model for both missionaries and those who support them?

11. How will this passage affect your giving?

Pray that God will use your gifts to meet the physical and emotional needs of his servants.

Now or Later

Take time to review what you have learned from your study of Philippians.

12. What are the major themes Paul has emphasized in Philippians?

13. What principles have you learned about living with meaning and purpose (1:20–26)?

about living with a proper attitude toward yourself and others (2:1–11)?

about the value of knowing Christ (3:4–11)?

about living a peaceful and contented life (4:4–19)?

14. What changes have you observed in your life as a result of studying Philippians?¹

¹ Baker, Donald. *Philippians: Jesus Our Joy: 9 Studies for Individuals or Groups*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 1999. Print. A LifeGuide Bible Study.