

# PHILIPPIANS

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

A 13-LESSON STUDY

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REFORMED EXPOSITORY  
BIBLE STUDY

**JON NIELSON**  
and **DENNIS E. JOHNSON**

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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All boxed quotations are taken from Dennis E. Johnson's *Philippians* in the Reformed Expository Commentary series. Page numbers in quotations refer to that source.

ISBN: 978-1-62995-924-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-925-2 (ePub)

Printed in the United States of America

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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken  
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

## INTRODUCING PHILIPPIANS

The epistle to the Philippians is a frank and encouraging pastoral letter from the apostle Paul to a congregation that he loves (see Phil. 4:1). His aims for this epistle are accomplished at two levels. At one level, Paul is writing to thank the Philippians for a generous contribution they have made toward his expenses (see 1:5; 4:10–20). Moreover, concern that the Philippians have shown over his well-being and over a health crisis that has been suffered by their representative, Epaphroditus, prompts Paul to reassure them (see 1:12–18; 2:25–30).

At a deeper level, however, the thank-you note Paul is writing gives him an opportunity to pursue a greater **main purpose**: that of addressing the congregation's underlying spiritual needs. He is suffering opposition, and so are they; and the joyful perspective that he takes on suffering—that its function is to advance Christ's gospel—invites his Philippian friends to see their experience in a new light and to replace cowardice with courage. After describing the “selfish ambition” of some who preach Christ in order to compound Paul's pain (see 1:16–17), the apostle warns his dear friends against the “selfish ambition” that undermines their own unity (see 2:1–4). The negative influence that self-righteous legalists are having on the church then moves Paul to rehearse the transition he himself made away from boasting in his own credentials in order to instead gratefully trust in Christ and his righteousness (see 3:2–9). Paul also lifts his friends' sights to heaven, where their citizenship is held and from where they await their Savior's return (see 3:12–21). Finally, Paul turns his thanks for the Philippians' generosity into a teaching moment about Christ-centered contentment (see 4:10–19).

This epistle's **author** is Paul the apostle (see 1:1), who once persecuted Christ's church (see 3:4–6). Since Paul's apostolic authority is accepted in Philippi, Paul bypasses the title “apostle” and identifies himself and Timothy



as “servants” of Christ Jesus. His use of the word *servants* is strategic, for Paul goes on to urge his friends to exhibit the mind of Christ, who humbly took “the form of a servant” for the sake of their salvation (2:7).

The epistle’s **audience** is “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (1:1). Acts 16:11–40 records how this church was planted in Philippi, “a leading city of . . . Macedonia” (v. 12), by Paul and Silas, whose team included Timothy (see vv. 1–3) as well as Luke, the author of Acts (see v. 11). Apparently the missionaries found no Jewish synagogue in Philippi, so their search for people who were worshipping the true God of Israel led them to a “place of prayer” by a river outside the city (v. 13). This absence of a synagogue in the city suggests that its Jewish community was so small that it lacked the minimum of ten Jewish men who were necessary for forming one.

All evidence points to the Philippian congregation’s being overwhelmingly composed of Gentiles—which would be consistent with Paul’s distinctive calling as apostle to the Gentiles (see Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:7–9). Luke’s account of the trip to Philippi focuses on three individuals whose lives were transformed by Christ’s power: Lydia, a textile importer from Thyatira who was a Gentile adherent to Israel’s faith (see Acts 16:13–15); a demon-possessed slave who was being exploited by her owners for her (alleged) ability for fortune-telling (see vv. 16–18); and a jailer who was converted along with his family (see vv. 25–34). We know that by the time Paul and his missionary team left Philippi, a fledgling congregation had formed there, since we see other “brothers” gathered at Lydia’s home to bid them farewell in verse 40. Paul reminds his friends, in Philippians 1:30, that they had witnessed the unjust treatment he and Silas had suffered when they had brought Christ’s good news to Philippi (see Acts 16:22–24, 36–39).

As Paul writes this epistle, roughly a decade later, the congregation has matured and now has a plurality of overseers (that is, “elders”—Acts 14:23) and deacons. The bonds of affection between Paul and this congregation have deepened through the ongoing tangible care they have shown him. As Paul was ministering in Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth, the Christians of Philippi—who were not affluent (see 2 Cor. 8:2)—repeatedly provided financial support for his ministry (see 2 Cor. 11:8–9; Phil. 4:10–19). Nor was their generosity limited to a monetary transaction: “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us” (2 Cor. 8:5). It is

no wonder, then, that Paul gives the Philippians the assurance that “I hold you in my heart. . . . I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:7–8).

Although they are free of many of the grave spiritual crises that Paul had to address in other churches, the Philippian congregation nonetheless faces challenges that require pastoral intervention. Paul mentions the opponents who are confronting them and the suffering they are enduring (see 1:28–30) as he urges them to stand firm and united (see v. 27). His summons to them to be unified and to focus on others’ interests instead of their own suggests that “selfish ambition” and “conceit” have been threatening these believers’ unity (see 2:1–4)—a suggestion that he confirms when he later appeals to two women in the congregation to “agree in the Lord” (see 4:2–3). Although the Philippians have not succumbed to the influence of Judaizing legalism or of reckless lawlessness, Paul still seeks to safeguard them from both (see 3:1–19).

Two **contexts** are significant to our study: both Paul’s and the Philippian Christians’. Paul is in chains (see 1:13–17) and anticipating an event in which he wants to conduct himself with courage (see 1:19–20). The most widely held and reasonable theory is that Paul is writing from Rome, where he awaits the hearing of his appeal to the Roman emperor Nero (see Acts 28:11–31)—an appeal that could result in either his execution or his exoneration. Consistent with Roman legal practice, Paul is bearing his own living expenses while he is in custody (see v. 30), which made the donation the Philippians have given to him particularly welcome. He is seeking the prayerful support of his brothers and sisters so that he may acquit himself courageously as Christ’s spokesman (see Phil. 1:19–20).

We explored some significant features of the Philippians’ own context when we were considering them as the book’s audience. One more aspect of their context that casts light on this epistle is the honored status that Philippi held as a Roman “colony” (Acts 16:12)—the citizens of which would enjoy the same privileges as did the citizens of Rome itself. As he writes to them, Paul draws from Philippi’s status as a colony to assure Christians that their citizenship is in heaven—that their identity and status are defined by the city from which their Savior (a title that Romans applied to their Caesars) will return in glory (see Phil. 3:20–21). Therefore Paul directs them to acquit themselves in a way that is “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27).

If a single **key verse** encapsulates the message of Philippians, it would be Philippians 1:21: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” In its immediate context, this statement is referring to the possible outcomes of Paul’s hearing before Caesar: *ongoing life* on earth, so that he can serve Christ’s people, or *death*—which would be “far better” for him, since he would then “be with Christ” (see 1:22–26). But his assertion that “to live is Christ” not only transforms our perspective on *suffering* but also applies to our *humility*, which preserves unity among Christians and leads us to serve others (see 2:1–11); to our *lifelong aspiration* to know Christ—to “gain Christ and be found in him” (see 3:4–11); and to our *contentment*, through thick and thin, which we find in “him who strengthens” us (4:13).

Two **theological themes** stand out in Philippians. First, Philippians 2:5–11 expresses, clearly and concisely, the whole New Testament’s teaching concerning the *person of Christ*. He is fully God, and thus equal with the Father, and fully human—he humbles himself to die as Isaiah 53 foretells that the Suffering Servant will. Exalted by God as a reward for his redemptive self-sacrifice, Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, to whom every knee will bow. Second, the spiritual autobiography Paul lays out in Philippians 3:2–11 clearly articulates the *doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone*, which he has already explained at length in his epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans. Here Paul makes clear that, when he speaks of the “works of the law” (Gal. 2:16), he has in view not only the external covenant boundary markers that he once considered “gain” but also *anything in himself or his behavior* that once gave him “confidence in the flesh” (see Phil. 3:4–7)—any “righteousness of [his] own” that stands in contrast to “the righteousness from God that depends on faith” and that “comes through faith in Christ” (3:9). Christ’s righteousness, alone, is the ground of justification, and we receive it through faith alone. Moreover, Paul shows that this faith that rests wholly in Christ’s righteousness, far from fostering spiritual complacency, energizes believers to “press on” in order to know Christ more fully and so to receive “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (see 3:12–14). Justification, which we receive as God’s free gift in Christ, fires our desire for and sustains our pursuit of holiness.

In terms of **practical application**, the first thing for us to notice is that Paul lays out these theological themes not as “entries” in a theological encyclopedia but as *truths that transform* our lives and relationships. In

2:5–11, Paul gives us the magnificent *carmen Christi* (“song of Christ”) in order to support his appeal for his Philippian friends to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (2:3). Likewise, Paul narrates the personal trajectory he followed from self-confidence to trust in Christ. He does so in order to protect his beloved sisters and brothers from the spiritual peril that is posed by righteous-looking, fine-sounding teachers who are, in reality, “dogs,” “evildoers,” and flesh mutilators (3:2). Nothing can be more practical than accurately drawing the line between theological truth and error. Along with every practical issue that he addresses in this brief epistle—our response to suffering, our choice between self-interest or concern for others, our confidence before God and hope for the future, our contentment no matter our circumstances—Paul repeatedly brings us back to *the touchstone of Christ* and the union we have with him by grace through our faith. As you study Philippians, notice that Christ centeredness!

Philippians shows us Paul’s pastoral strategy of *teaching by example*. He devotes considerable space to writing about his imprisonment in order to model for suffering saints how they can respond to their own persecutors. He elaborates on his plans to send Timothy and Epaphroditus and hints that these leaders will show the Philippians what it looks like to seek others’ interests (see 2:19–22; see also 2:1–4) and to risk one’s life for the work of Christ (see 2:27–30). While he humbly acknowledges in 3:13 that he has not reached perfection, Paul still offers his mindset as one that the mature should share, and he even urges the whole congregation, “Join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us” (3:15–17). He does not reduce Christ’s humility during his suffering to something merely exemplary—at its core, Christ’s humble suffering is redemptive and substitutionary, as the echoes of Isaiah 53 in Philippians 2:5–11 demonstrate. Yet through our union with Christ we receive not only his imputed righteousness but also his “mind” (see 2:5), and “God . . . works in [us], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13).

Finally, by portraying for us a Christ-focused life, Paul is also inviting us to a life of invincible *joy*, no matter our challenges or circumstances. He rejoices when Christ is proclaimed—even by those who are motivated by rivalry instead of love (see 1:17–18). He rejoices at the prospect of reunions between fellow believers (see 1:25; 2:29). His joy is complete when Christians

cultivate unity through their humility (see 2:1–4). His brothers and sisters in Jesus are his joy and his crown (see 4:1)—and so, of course, he prays for them with joy (see 1:4). Even if, instead of restoring Paul to his friends’ company and giving him an opportunity to serve them further, Christ has ordained his imminent death, Paul rejoices over the possibility of being poured out on the sacrificial offering of their faith, and he urges them to share his joy (see 2:17–18). Jesus’s Spirit has so saturated Paul’s heart with deep joy, which springs not from changeable circumstances but from his changeless Lord, that the apostle urges his readers—not once, or twice, but three times—to

*Rejoice* in the Lord. (3:1)

*Rejoice* in the Lord always; again I will say, *rejoice*. (4:4)

## OUTLINE

1. Introduction (1:1–11)
  - A. Salutation (1:1–2)
  - B. Thanksgiving and prayer (1:3–11)
2. Paul’s Situation (1:12–26)
  - A. Gospel advancement through chains (1:12–18)
  - B. Life or death weighed against others’ needs (1:19–26)
3. The Philippians’ Situation (1:27–2:18)
  - A. Unity in the face of external opponents (1:27–30)
  - B. Humility toward each other (2:1–11)
  - C. Purity amid a twisted generation (2:12–18)
4. Paul’s Plans, and Some Trustworthy Examples (2:19–30)
5. The Twin Threats Facing the Philippian Church (3:1–21)
  - A. Legalism versus rest in Christ’s righteousness (3:1–16)
  - B. Earthbound lawlessness versus heavenly citizenship (3:17–21)
6. Call to Staunch Unity, Joyful Prayer, and Pure Thought (4:1–9)
7. Partnership and Contentment (4:10–20)
8. Closing Greetings and Benediction (4:21–23)

Dennis E. Johnson  
Author of *Philippians* (REC)

## LESSON 1

# FINISHING WHAT HE STARTS

Philippians 1:1–8

### THE BIG PICTURE

Paul’s epistle to the Philippians, which he most likely wrote while imprisoned in Rome, includes a rebuke of a local church congregation that was plagued by selfishness, disunity, and quarreling. Yet Paul practices his own instruction regarding thankful prayer, from Philippians 4:6, as he gives thanks for the believers in Philippi and exultantly assures them that God will continue the good work he has begun in them (1:6).

Paul’s initial greeting introduces some key themes of the entire letter: he calls himself and Timothy “servants,” or slaves, of Christ Jesus, which bespeaks Paul’s humble understanding of the calling, ministry, and suffering he has experienced for Jesus and the gospel (1:1). The recipients of this letter are the “saints” in Philippi, which includes their leaders: the overseers and deacons. The fact that Paul addresses these leaders in particular, in verse 1, places some burden on these overseers of the church to respond to the calls from later in the epistle for both humility and unity to be promoted among God’s people (v. 1). Finally, the blessing he pronounces of both “grace” and “peace” from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ speaks to the gospel foundation, and the relational implications, of all that he will go on to say to the church at Philippi (1:2).

After this greeting, Paul gives thanks for the believers at Philippi, who have boldly and generously partnered with him in gospel ministry for quite some time (1:3–5). Finally, he concludes with deeply personal words of



## OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. What do you notice about the way Paul introduces himself at the outset of this letter? How does he describe his audience—and what does he emphasize and highlight about them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. List some of the reasons that Paul is thankful for the Philippian believers. How have they made their love for him—and for the gospel of Jesus Christ—clearly evident?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. In these opening verses, what theological truths does Paul remind the Philippian church of in order to encourage them?

### **Joyful Slavery, pg. 8**

The Philippians need to see dramatized in Paul and in Timothy the counterintuitive truth that these men bear God’s *authority* because Christ has captivated them as his *slaves*. Paul and Timothy are living proof that those whom Jesus *saves* he *enslaves*. In their self-centered preoccupations and competing agendas, Paul’s Philippian friends need to see what joyful slavery looks like, up close and personal.



## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. Why do you think Paul uses the label *servant* (or *slave*) to describe Timothy and himself (1:1)? What themes does this label hint will be in this letter? What call does it hint that God has given to his people at Philippi?
  
7. Why do you think Paul explicitly mentions “overseers and deacons” in his greeting (1:1)? What does his use of the label “saints” tell us about how he views the men and women in the church at Philippi?
  
8. What do you think Paul means when he mentions the Philippians’ “partnership in the gospel” (1:5)? How might the Philippian church have been partnering with Paul (1:7)?
  
9. Describe the assurance that Paul gives the Philippian believers in verse 6—what “good work” is God going to complete, and what is the foundation for this good work?

10. What emotions does Paul express regarding the Philippian believers in 1:7–8? What do they tell us about the apostle’s relationships with the people and churches he served?
  
11. What does Paul say in verses 5, 7, and 8 to emphasize the link and union he has with the Philippians? Even though they haven’t been in prison with him or traveled and preached as he has, he sees them as collaborators in his gospel ministry—what does this illustrate for you about partnering in the gospel in our world today?

## BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. Read Acts 16:11–34 to help you to recall the context of Paul’s original gospel ministry in the city of Philippi. What notable conversions occurred during his visit? What resistance did his ministry face? What evidence of the power of the gospel do you see having occurred—even amid Paul’s trials and suffering?

### **Signs of New Life, pg. 35**

Are you trusting today in Jesus’ blood and righteousness, rather than in your own achievements? That faith is the hallmark of those who have partnership in the gospel, who are partners with Paul in God’s grace. Such trust is the sign of new life, showing that the living God has begun a good work in you, turning your ingrown heart “inside out,” to adore him gratefully and to love others lavishly.

13. Read Ephesians 2:1–10, and note the *before* (vv. 1–3) and *after* (vv. 4–10) stages related to the gospel’s work in our lives. How does this passage enhance our understanding of the “good work” that Philippians 1:6 says God has begun in all those who are saved by faith in Christ? What is God’s purpose for his people?

## THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. The word *saints* (meaning “holy ones”), which Paul uses in Philippians 1:1 to describe the members of the church, illustrates the beautiful doctrine of the *priesthood of all believers*. In Christ, we are all holy—we have been declared righteous because of our faith in Jesus and given access to God the Father through him. How does this view of saints differ from that of other religious traditions or teachings?
  
15. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes sanctification with these words: “Sanctification is throughout, in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part: whence arises a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (13.2). What does it mean that God’s work in us will *never* be completed in this life? What will change at the “day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6)?



## PRAYER PROMPT

As you conclude this first lesson in your study of Philippians, praise God for beginning a good work in you through the power of the Holy Spirit, who alone enables us to repent of our sin and have faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. Thank him for the sovereign work he has done to accomplish your salvation and for the promise he has made to complete the work he has begun in you. Ask him for strength, energy, humility, and joy as you share in ministry with others who follow Jesus and proclaim the gospel.