

To live is Christ

DISCOVERING CHRIST-CENTERED COMMUNITY
AND MISSION IN PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILIPPI

To live is Christ

Bible Studies for Small Groups and Individuals, by Tim Thorburn.

These studies appear in print under the title **Partners for Life**.

CONTENTS

Study 1: Partners in the gospel [Philippians 1:1-8]

Study 2: Praying for partners [Philippians 1:9-11]

Study 3: Finding freedom [Philippians 1:12-30]

Study 4: Jesus on unity [Philippians 1:27-2:11]

Study 5: Meeting the challenge [Philippians 2:12-30]

Study 6: True confidence [Philippians 3:1-11]

Study 7: Going for glory [Philippians 3:10-4:1]

Study 8: Standing firm [Philippians 4:1-23]

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Partners for Life

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All material is used with permission. Numerous editorial changes have been made for the sake of brevity and contextualization. Introduction by Katie Allan. All images used in these studies are not in the original work - they are taken from the public domain, or used by permission.

How to make the most of these studies

1. What is this all about?

These studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of interaction— interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. How to use these studies on your own

Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.

Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.

Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

3. How to use these studies in a small group

Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible Study groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse.

For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.

We hope that you enjoy and benefit from your time working through these studies.

Introduction to Philippians



In the early 50s, during his second (of three) missionary journey, Paul visited the Roman city of Philippi, in Macedonia. Acts 16:11-40 tells the story. Because there appears to be no synagogue in Philippi – no formal place for Paul to preach – he, along with Silas, Timothy and Luke, decide to gate-crash the local women’s prayer meeting. The upshot is that Lydia, apparently a Gentile God-fearer, and her household become Christians... the humble beginning of the church in Philippi!

Next thing, trouble erupts in Philippi. Paul frees a slave girl from an evil spirit which had enabled her to predict the future. The slave girl’s owners are enraged at the loss of the income previously enjoyed from her prophetic powers. They get Paul and Silas thrown into prison, claiming they are advocating practices unlawful in a Roman city.

In the middle of the night, while joyfully praying and singing hymns in their prison cell (what we would all be doing in such circumstances!), an earthquake strikes and the prison doors and chains come loose. The jailer, afraid of the dire punishment he’d receive from the Roman authorities for having his prisoners escape, draws his sword to kill himself. Paul and Silas, however, remain! Trembling, the jailer asks what he must do to be saved. Paul and Silas give him the gospel: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ”. The church in Philippi gains one joyful jailer and his household.

Morning comes and the authorities discover they have treated Paul and Silas - both Roman citizens - unlawfully. After a public apology, they pay a visit to Lydia and encouraged the fledgling church. Paul, Silas and Timothy continue on the journey towards Corinth, leaving Luke behind.

A close relationship develops between Paul and his fellow believers in Philippi. He drops in to visit at least twice more in his missionary travels (Acts 20:1-3). And the Philippians faithfully support him in his difficult times in ministry. They come to his aid multiple times in Thessalonica (Phil 4:16). He receives assistance from them while he was in Corinth (2 Cor 11:7-9). Despite their own hardship, they generously support Paul's financial collection from Gentile churches for the church in Jerusalem as an expression of love and unity in its trial (2 Cor 8:1-5; Rom 15: 26,7).

While delivering the offering from the Gentile churches to Jerusalem, Paul's Jewish opponents manage to get him imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 21-24). The Philippians want to help him during this time in prison but can't because of their own difficulties (Phil 4:10). After two years in prison in Caesarea, Paul makes a successful appeal to have his trial taken before the Emperor in Rome, and he sets sail (Acts 25:10-12; 27:1).

Paul is now a prisoner in Rome – a time of affliction and uncertainty, but also an opportunity to proclaim the gospel (Acts 28:16-31; Phil 1:12-14). This time the Philippian church is able to help. They send Epaphroditus with encouragement and financial support (Phil 4:18).

In around 60-62 AD Paul, with Timothy beside him tending his needs, writes to his friends in Philippi. And we have the privilege of reading what he wrote! What did he say? What were his concerns? What he writes reveals what was most important for him and his friends.

He writes to thank the folk in Philippi for their generosity (4:10-20) and to assure them of Epaphroditus' wellbeing, after his deathly illness experienced on his way to Rome (2:25-28).

He writes to tell them how he is going – that despite his hardships, he is rejoicing in the fact that his imprisonment is serving to advance the gospel (1:12-14).

He also expresses his concern for their situation. His friends in Philippi are experiencing their own difficulties: external opposition (1:28ff.), the influence of false teachers (3:2ff.), and disharmony within the church (2:2-4; 4:2). He urges them, along with him, to continue living in a manner worthy of the gospel - to stand fast and be united in the face of opposition (1:27,28), to live lives of service in Christ-like humility (2:3ff.), to join with him in persevering to their glorious heavenly end (2:12ff.)... and always rejoicing (4:4ff.).

We learn that the relationship between Paul and the Philippian church is deep and Christ-centered! His concern for them is heart-felt. And we learn that Paul doesn't see himself proclaiming and suffering for the gospel alone. He and his Philippian brothers and sisters are in this thing together!¹

Moises Silva, *Philippians* (ECNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005); Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995); Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983); Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991). This introduction is by Katie Allan.

The word ‘partnership’ is often correctly translated as ‘fellowship’. But ‘fellowship’ is a word Christians throw around with happy abandon. We have ‘fellowship’ after the service, where food and drinks are served in a comfortable atmosphere, and we report that “the fellowship was great” (even if the rest was lousy). We rightly think fellowship has something to do with warm relationships with others. Yet we



are often disappointed with what passes for fellowship in the normal course of events.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians teaches a lot about genuine Christian fellowship. Fellowship is something we can have even when we aren’t in each other’s company, although it usually makes us long for that company (see 1:8). It is the relationship created by having a stake in a common property or enterprise. And Christians have some very significant common property—we are “partakers/sharers” in God’s grace (Phil 1:7). We each benefit enormously from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in forgiveness and hope and in the new life of God’s Spirit. Despite differences in race, gender and economic affluence (and hair style), what we share in common is far more significant than these differences.

And **we can be partners in the cause of the gospel, as we work together to see the lost won to Christ and the won strengthened in faith, hope and love.** Our roles may vary greatly—someone tidies the church, another flicks switches on the PA system, someone else proclaims Christ through that PA system to those sitting on the pews, and all of us pray like crazy for God to be merciful to the hearers. But our common purpose creates a rich and energetic fellowship. In fact, for many of us the richest experiences of fellowship have been as part of a team working intensely in the cause of the gospel—on a beach mission, or a camp, or at a church outreach event.

The paradoxical thing about fellowship is that if we focus on *trying* to have fellowship, it usually falls flat. Fellowship is a by-product of focusing on the thing we hold in common – the Gospel. And what a terrific by-product it is!

IMPLICATIONS

(consider one, some, or all of the following questions)

5. Sometimes Christians think the gospel is something you believe at the start of your Christian life, and then you move on to focus on morals and Christian duties. What do you think Paul would say to this?

6. What are some specific things you and your group are partners in because you are Christians?

7. Why do you think Christian fellowship often seems so shallow (if it does)?

8. From what you have seen of the fellowship between Paul and the Philippians, what are some ways you can express and deepen your fellowship:

- with your non-church friends/workmates?

- with people in your church?

- with people you know who are serving Jesus in other parts of the world?

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Give joyful thanks to God for the grace in which you share—for the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for our sins.

Thank God for those with whom you are partners in the gospel—both near and far—and ask God to give you “the affection of Christ Jesus” for them.

Ask for wisdom and discernment, that your church might think clearly about how to proclaim the gospel in your community, and your everyday lives.

Study 2 **PRAYING FOR PARTNERS**

Philippians 1:9-11

FOR STARTERS

1. If you feel comfortable, share the kinds of things you pray for other people.

2. What aspects of praying do you find difficult (if any)?

“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”, wrote James (Jas 5:16). God listens to the prayers of people who call out to him in faith, and—stunningly—he acts on them. It is easy for us to overlook the extraordinary privilege of prayer. We can take it for granted that our requests are brought before our great God and Father, and that he hears them and responds to them. When we remember this amazing fact, how should it affect our attitude toward prayer and what we pray for?

In study 1 we investigated Paul’s partnership with the Philippians (Phil 1:3-8), and discovered the affection he had for them because they were partners. For Paul, this led naturally to giving thanks to God for them and praying joyfully for them (vv. 3-4). It is a revealing study of Paul’s desires as he came before his heavenly Father in prayer.

In this study we will be looking at what Paul actually prays for the Philippian Christians.

READ Philippians 1:9-11

3. We are going to try to make sense of Paul’s prayer. Here’s how we’ll do it: (a) **separate into 2 equal groups**, (b) write each part of the prayer below on a separate card, (c) scatter the cards on a table and try to arrange the cards to show the logical flow of the prayer, (d) consider what leads to what? After you’re done, rejoin the main group.

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

4. In your own words, summarise Paul’s desire for the Philippians.

5. What do you think it means to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness”?

6. According to Paul’s prayer, what will enable the Philippians to “discern what is best/approve what is excellent” (v. 10)? And for whom is it “best/excellent”?

Paul’s love for his fellow believers can put us to shame. How often do we pray that our Christian friends would abound in love and discernment, that they would be pure and blameless, and that their lives would bear the fruit of righteousness? Are these our concerns for them? Or do we simply slip into praying for the mundane aspects of life?

Perhaps during your regular time of prayer you could ‘reshape’ your prayer requests around desires such as these. What would it mean for your daily routine (work, looking after children, shopping, travelling, doing housework, attending school or university—whatever it might be) to be lived “to the glory and praise of God”? The questions below may help you to explore some answers.

IMPLICATIONS

(consider one, some, or all of the following questions)

7. Thinking specifically about verse 9:
 - (a) Why do the ideas of love and knowledge go together, in Paul’s prayer?

 - (b) What difference would it make in your life if God gave you more of the things Paul prays for in this verse?

(c) Why do you think Paul tells the Philippian Christians he is praying these things for them? What effect might it have on them and on their fellowship?

(d) Look back at your answer to question 1. How do the things Paul prays for compare with the things you usually pray for people? What lessons can you take away about who to pray for and what to pray for them?

Paul's prayer is driven by his love for Jesus, and his love for the Philippians. As 'partners' in the gospel Paul prays they would abound in love, knowledge, and righteous living so that God might be glorified. May our prayers express our desire to see Paul's prayer come to life in us!

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Thank God for listening to our prayers and answering them according to his will (1 John 5:14-15).

Ask God to give you knowledge, discernment and love.

Think of some people for whom you would like to pray this prayer in Philippians 1:9-11—and then pray it for them!

Study 3 **FINDING FREEDOM**

Philippians 1:12-30

FOR STARTERS

1. What sorts of things have frustrated you in the past week? How many were the results of circumstances over which you had little control?

It is a pretty common experience to feel trapped by many of the circumstances of life. Whether it is a job, a relationship, housing, health or finances, many of us feel that we just aren't free to do what we want. We are held back or frustrated—we want to break free! Some of these restrictive circumstances are our own fault because we have made bad choices. But many are outside our direct control, and these are the ones that tend to annoy us: the weather doesn't fit our plans; other people let us down or get in the way; the bus is late; someone crashes into our car. There is always something stopping us from doing what we want to do.

For many people, freedom could be defined as “No-one and nothing stopping me from doing what I want to do”. Under this definition, how free do you feel?

In this study, we get an insight into how free the apostle Paul felt, and why he felt that way.

READ Philippians 1:12-26

2. What do we learn about Paul's circumstances? Describe how Paul reacts to his circumstances.
3. How has what happened to Paul “really served to advance the gospel” (v. 12)?
4. What does all this tell us about Paul's aims and goals? Which verse best captures Paul's aim in life?

8. What changes need to take place in your mind, your heart and your life in order to experience the sort of freedom Paul experienced? Or, in what aspects of life have you managed to achieve the kind of freedom Paul experienced? Share or write down some of your successes and failures in this regard.
9. Are there any situations coming up this week in which you may feel frustrated or trapped? How can you apply what you have learned from this passage to those situations?

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Thank God for those people all over the world who are “bold to speak the word without fear” amidst intense persecution or ridicule. Pray that Christians in your part of the world would do the same.

Ask God to help you respond to daily frustrations—both large and small—with a firm trust in his purposes and control over all things.

Ask God to so transform your life that your manner of life is “worthy of the gospel of Christ”, and your primary goal is that Christ will be honoured in your body.

God's will for us is that we become like Jesus (see Romans 8:28-29). We often have a limited view of what becoming like Jesus involves, as if it is simply a matter of being nice—caring, sensitive, non-judgmental, patient and humble. But **when the Bible writers urge us to be like Jesus, they usually have in mind the *purpose* as well as the *behaviour* of Jesus.**

Jesus was indeed humble (and so we should be, too); but Jesus was driven by the purpose of saving many—that was *why* he willingly humbled himself. Becoming like Jesus will involve having the same purpose and passion (i.e. the salvation of others), which will lead us to humbly lay down our lives for the benefit of others. That purpose will motivate us to be humble toward both our fellow believers and unbelievers—toward fellow believers for their final salvation and so that we can be united with them in striving for the salvation of unbelievers, and toward unbelievers in wanting their salvation.

IMPLICATIONS

(consider one, some, or all of the following questions)

9. What sort of lifestyle is “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27)?

10. If you find yourself in tension with others in your church or Bible study group, what could you do to try to create the sort of unity God wants you to have?

11. What do you need to do/change in your own life in order to be unified with your brothers and sisters in Christ? Try to be specific.

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Give thanks and praise to God for being willing to send Jesus to save us.

Pray that we would have the same attitude of humility, love, and service that Jesus did.

Ask God to help us find ways to experience and share the unity we have in Christ.

Study 5 **MEETING THE CHALLENGE**

Philippians 2:12-30

Living a life that's worthy of the gospel of Jesus (1:27) is a huge challenge. We find it difficult enough to live in a manner that is worthy of our parents, our children, our country or our profession. A life that is worthy of Jesus Christ and his death, resurrection and return—that seems almost impossible! Thankfully, this section in Philippians includes a crucial paragraph that shows us how to live such a life. Let's begin this study by reviewing and investigating some of the attitudes and behaviours that are worthy of the gospel.

1. **READ** the following passages and answer these questions: What sort of behaviour is worthy of the gospel? How easy is it for you to behave this way?

1:27-2:2

2:3-4

2:14

2:15-16

Most likely, you will have one of two reactions to the huge challenges God has put in front of us in Philippians so far. The first is the Superman reaction: "I can do this; just give me a phone booth to put on the right gear and I'll leap the tallest building in a single stride!"

The second reaction is the exact opposite: "I can't possibly do it. It's too hard to really change. I'll always be this way, so I'll just try to keep my nose clean and get on with life."

If you are like me, you'll swing back and forth between the two reactions. After an inspiring convention or a convicting sermon, I become Superman for a day or two. But then I quickly revert to the inertia of the "it's too hard" response—until the next camp or sermon. And if I happen to see outstanding examples of Christ-like heroes around me, it only heightens both reactions!

How do you react to the challenges of the passages you looked at above?

If you feel inadequate at present—if you feel as if you are not living a life that is very worthy of the gospel—how might you turn it around? How would you go about *trying* to change?

READ Philippians 2:12-13

2. What are we instructed to do?

3. What does *God* do? And what ‘parts’ of us is God at work in?

4. In verse 12, “work out” implies a *continuous, sustained, strenuous effort* by each of us living out our salvation to the end. It doesn’t refer to working *for* our salvation; we know that salvation comes to us freely through Christ (see Ephesians 2:1-10 if you are unsure). What do you think are the practical implications of this ‘working out’ when we want ‘quick fixes’ in our Christian life?

5. Verse 13 starts with ‘for’ (meaning ‘because’). Why is it worth putting personal effort into changing? Is there hope of real and permanent change?

These short verses warn us away from false trails about Christian growth. They show us some critical aspects of how Christian growth is achieved, and so expose wrong ways of thinking.

One of the most enticing false trails is the ‘instant sanctification’ offer. It comes in a variety of packages. I first heard it under the guise of ‘full surrender’ thinking: if you will only surrender every area of your life to the lordship of Jesus, then you will be victorious over sin. A similar idea is found in the teaching of the ‘baptism/fullness of the Spirit’ (for instant power to conquer all barriers, both internal and external). All of these approaches to Christian living and experience have one thing in common: the promise of instantaneous transformation. Part of their attractiveness is that they offer something akin to many people’s conversion experience—an instant solution to our guilt before God. Our sins are forgiven the moment we trust Jesus, but in this world we continue to struggle with sin. So when someone comes along and offers an instant solution to our ongoing struggle with sin, it strongly appeals (who wouldn’t want to be sinless?) and also seems to fit our experience of God’s grace in forgiving sin.

But Philippians 2:12-13 has shown us that this is not the case. When Christ returns we will be made sinless, but in the meantime there is no instant sinlessness—we need to continue to ‘work out’ our salvation.

The other false trail is the ‘power of positive thinking’ message that is so prevalent in counselling and in business. It encourages us to think that we can be whatever we want to be, simply by the power of our own will and effort. But the Bible clearly teaches that, left to our own devices, we can’t be what God wants us to be (Rom 8:7-8). Self-centred people can’t change themselves into selfless people (because they are only motivated by self-interest)! **It is only when God, by his Spirit, works in us from the inside out that we have any hope of real and lasting change.**

IMPLICATIONS

(consider one, some, or all of the following questions)

6. What has Philippians 2:12-13 taught you about the *process* of change (to become more Christ-like)?

7. “Your will is *your* will—God won’t touch that. He doesn’t make you do anything.” Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not?

8. Look back over question 1 at the beginning of the study and choose one area of behaviour in which you want to be different. What practical steps can you take to “work out your own salvation” in this area?

9. How will you keep “for it is God who works in you” in the process?

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Thank God for the wonderful examples of Christian service that we have in Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Thank God for giving us the word of life (2:16).

It can be difficult to wrap your mind around Philippians 2:12-13. Ask God for wisdom, understanding and, above all, faith in his promises.

Ask God to help you in the area/s you mentioned in your answer to the final question above.

Study 6 **TRUE CONFIDENCE**

Philippians 3:1-11

FOR STARTERS

1. Do you think Christians should have self-confidence? Why or why not?

2. Are you confident about yourself in any area? (it's OK to tell us, we won't assume you're bragging!)

Self-confidence is a highly-prized commodity in our world. Advertisers promise that their product will deliver, from toothpaste that bleaches your teeth to the investment managers who guarantee your future. But confidence sits uneasily with the Christian—aren't we supposed to be the humble ones? Doesn't confidence easily turn into arrogance? In this study, we'll look at how someone can be confident without being self-confident.

READ Philippians 3:1-11

3. Look at Paul's list of 'qualifications' (vv. 5-6). Which of these was he given, and which are his own achievements?

4. How did Paul previously think about his credentials? What place did they have in his life?

5. How does Paul think about them now?

6. In verse 8, Paul compares two things:

- What are they? Explain each in your own words.

- Which is better? Why?

- Are they really so mutually exclusive? Why or why not?

7. In verse 9, Paul compares two things:

- What are they? Explain each in your own words.

- Which is better? Why?

- Are they really so mutually exclusive? Why or why not?

This is one of those Bible passages that reveal the very heart of Christianity. The apostle Paul shares some of the story of his own conversion from a self-confident Jewish Pharisee to a Christian, and in doing so he clearly shows us what Christianity is and what it isn't.

1. Christianity is a relationship, not a religion

Paul had been a religious fanatic, earnestly building a religious résumé that he thought would impress God and keep him happy. But when he met the living Lord Jesus Christ, everything was turned right side up. Jesus was a person who could be known. Jesus initiated a relationship, a friendship with Paul. It wasn't the chummy mateship of equals—Paul knew that Jesus was his Lord—but it was a real, personal relationship. Relationships don't work by rituals or impressive performances. And relationships are what life is all about, especially relationship with our Creator.

2. Christianity is about forgiveness, not moral performance

Paul used to consider himself righteous before God because he hadn't blatantly transgressed any of God's law. But meeting Jesus Christ shattered the confidence he had in his own performance, for Jesus had died under the curse of God, shouldering the curse of humanity's sin. That included Paul's sin. Why would Christ die if Paul's (or our) performance was adequate? And Christ's death offered forgiveness and acceptance with God, which Paul embraced. Paul no longer wanted to stand on his own before God, relying on his moral goodness; he wanted to be found in Christ, given a righteousness by God. Paul's confidence was no longer in himself; it was in Christ and his death.

These two characteristics of authentic Christianity necessarily go together. You can't have a friendship with Jesus Christ and at the same time be confident in your own moral or religious performance makes you right with God.

IMPLICATIONS

(consider one, some, or all of the following questions)

8. How should we think about our achievements and 'religious credentials'? Is there a place for Christian self-confidence?

9. Think about what it means to put "confidence in the flesh" (v. 3). In what ways are Christians tempted to do so? How can we avoid doing this?

10. If you had to write your own 'spiritual résumé' for God, what would you put in it?

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Rejoice in the Lord (v. 1) and give thanks for the righteousness that "comes through faith in Christ" (v. 9).

Praise God for such a blessing, thank him for the freedom it brings.

Ask God to help you count 'everything as rubbish' in order that you may gain Christ.

Study 7 **GOING FOR GLORY**

Philippians 3:10-4:1

FOR STARTERS

1. How important do you think it is to have a goal in life?

2. If someone observed everything you did, said and thought in the last week, what conclusion might they draw about what your goal in life is?

When you meet someone you like, chances are that you will try to get to know them better. You will make a date to meet again, find an activity you enjoy in common, or think of some reason to cross paths. You will be drawn to each other.

Generally, that's how most marriages start! The initial encounter sparks a hunger for more contact, and grows into a desire to know more about this intriguing new friend. The first meeting turns out to be the exciting beginning, not the end.

We saw in the previous passage that Christianity is about a relationship with the living Lord Jesus. Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. But after that first meeting, Paul's attitude wasn't, "I know Jesus now, so I don't want to see him again"; instead, that first encounter created a hunger to know Jesus more and more. Paul already knows Jesus (v. 8), and so he wants to know Jesus (v. 10). But how does that happen—where is the Christian life going and how do we get there?

Read Philippians 3:10-4:1

3. Paul pictures the Christian life as being like a running race. In order to explore what Paul is saying, **separate into two groups**, and using the whiteboards provided, try to draw a picture or diagram of Paul running the race, using the following information (artistic merit isn't required!):

Where did the race begin? (Look back at 3:7-9.)

How did Paul become a runner?

Where is the finish line?

What is at the finish line?

How far has Paul got?

How does he run—which direction, what focus, what level of effort?

What is his attitude to other runners?

What is the prize? And who gets it?

When you're done, rejoin the main group and show everyone the finished product.

4. According to this passage, in what ways is the Christian life like a race? Make a quick list of the similarities Paul mentions.



5. What is the goal of the Christian life—what are we meant to be running toward? List everything Paul says in this passage about the goal, and try to make sense of the information you gather.

6. How are we to run toward the goal? List everything Paul says in this passage about the way he 'runs the race', and explain what each might mean for the real business of living the Christian life:

What Paul says	Explain the real significance

Paul was eagerly looking forward to the day when Jesus returns, for then Paul will know him fully. His hunger for Christ will be satisfied. That is the goal and the prize of Christian faith: **to know Jesus**.

But there is another aspect to the prize: **we will be transformed to be like Jesus**. Transformation is something that happens in our human relationships; we become like the people we hang around with. We find ourselves imitating their mannerisms and sharing their values and humour. Similarly, knowing Jesus is transforming—we become like him. Ultimately, he will transform even our bodies to be like his glorious resurrection body (v. 21). In the meantime, Paul wanted to become like Jesus (v. 10); in particular, like Jesus in his death. For it is in his death that we see most clearly the true character of Jesus—his love, humility, wisdom, determination, faithfulness, patience, humanity and deity (remember 2:5-11). It is in his death that we know Christ best.

So that is the goal and the prize—to know Jesus and to become like him. The more Paul knew Jesus, the more he wanted to know Jesus, and the more he wanted to become like Jesus.

But how do we know Christ better in the here and now while we wait for his return? Paul gives us an insight in verse 10—it is in knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection *and the fellowship of his sufferings*. The more Paul suffered like Christ suffered, the more he knew Christ.

The suffering of Christ here is not his redemptive death on the cross (different Greek words are used for that in the original Bible manuscripts), but the other sufferings that accompanied his redemptive death. He was rejected, mocked, beaten, insulted and spat upon by those for whom he was dying. And Paul was rejected, mocked, beaten, insulted and spat upon by those to whom he preached the gospel of Christ. They both shared in suffering by sharing the gospel, and serving God for the salvation of others.

It’s not about looking for suffering and trouble – after all, we’re called to “live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:18). But in pressing on to the goal, opposition, ridicule, and suffering are bound to come our way. Yet no matter how hard things got, Paul hung in there, empowered to love and suffer, to preach and serve. That is the power of the resurrection at work in his life.

IMPLICATIONS

(consider one, some, or all of the following questions)

7. Has the goal of knowing Christ and becoming like him gripped your heart? How does this show itself in your life?

8. Think about the people you aspire to be like. What is it about them that appeals to you? How do they compare to Jesus?

9. If you wanted to know Jesus better, how could you go about it?

10. Is your eye on the prize? How would you live your life differently if it were?

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Praise and thank God for the ways in which you are suffering (or have suffered) as a result of striving for the faith of the gospel. Ask God to use this suffering to transform you so that you are more like the Lord Jesus.

Pray these things also for Christians around the world who live in countries that are extremely hostile to the gospel, and ask God to help them stand firm in the Lord.

Ask God to grant you (and those you have just prayed for) focus and endurance so that you press on toward the goal, setting your mind not on earthly things but on heavenly things.

Study 8 **STANDING FIRM**

Philippians 4:1-23

FOR STARTERS

1. So far in your journey as a Christian, what things have unsettled you or threatened your commitment to Christ?

For many of us, life feels quite unstable and uncertain. We feel like we should be able to sail through unruffled, but the reality is far different. We would love to feel stable and unstressed, but few of us do. Even those living in affluent and politically stable countries seem to get as stressed as those living in more precarious circumstances. A recent government inquiry in Australia found that the number one cause of sick leave from work is stress. Many companies now employ people to help prevent stress in their employees, but it appears that many of these people are also on leave—suffering from severe stress!



In Philippians 4:1, Paul says, “you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” Living a stable, unstressed life is both desirable and possible for Christians. We need to work out what ‘unstressed’ would look like in a Christian life.

READ Philippians 4:1

2. What has Paul said in Philippians 3 to help us “stand firm in the Lord”?

READ Philippians 4:2-20

3. In verses 4-7, Paul addresses our anxieties. How does Paul urge us to respond to anxiety, and what is the result?

GIVE THANKS AND PRAY

Thank God for his kindness in supplying our every need “according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus”. Thank him especially for providing the perfect sacrifice for our sins, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If there is any Christian with whom you have significant tensions, or with whom you have fallen out, pray for them now. Ask for God’s help in repairing or restoring the relationship.

Ask for God’s help in practising contentment in your current situation, and in following Paul’s advice in verses 8-9.

