

CONTENTS

Group Bible Study	2
Introduction to Philippians	5
Study 1 – 1:1-8: A passion for partners in the Gospel	9
Study 2 – 1:9-11: Partners in prayer	13
Study 3 – 1:12-26: The priority of the Gospel	17
Study 4 – 1:27-2:4: Perfect unity	21
Study 5 – 2:5-11: The pattern of Jesus	25

Group Bible Study

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying to the people to whom it was first written as well as to understand it for our particular day and generation. So, the top priority is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

Pray: Our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, through the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for a study.

Ask: In order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep in mind six important questions:

1. **Who is speaking?** Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every writer of the Bible was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question “Who is speaking?” will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey today.
2. **Who is spoken to?** We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is obviously pertinent and relevant for Noah, but not for us.
3. **When is the Bible writer speaking?** In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the law and those who live under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the way of Christ. Therefore, the principles we see with regards to worship in the Old Testament have a relevance to us, but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.
4. **What type of language is the writer using?** The languages used

are usually one of two types: either literal or figurative. Sometimes both will be mixed together in one passage – for example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, which is clearly a figurative form of speech. However, he is also described as the one who takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but he was the one who became the offering for our sins.

5. **What are the conditions or circumstances in which this writing is given?** If we can get to grips with the particular circumstances the writer is facing when he writes, it helps us to understand what he is saying.

6. **What is the context of the Bible passage?** Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the passage within the whole Bible.

The Bible is indeed God’s inspired word, it is his revelation to all mankind. So in order for us to understand the Bible we must study it properly. Only then can we “*correctly handle the word of truth*”. And if we keep these six simple questions in mind as we prepare our study, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God’s word.

Plan: For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into parts or sections so that you can clearly divide up the passage you are looking at.
2. Think about what you don’t understand in the passage and therefore what others might not understand as well. What parts do you need to gain more background and information about? Be ready to deal with puzzles that people will ask you about. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask ‘What is the kingdom of God?’, ‘What is a Pharisee?’ These are obvious things that people might need to have some more information about.

3. Having broken the passage up into sections, we then come to thinking about questions. You can use the questions that are in this book. However, you may want to write your own, which is of course perfectly all right. Questions can be one of three types.

Understanding. The first type of question should be aimed a trying to draw out our understanding of what the passage is saying.

Significance. Only once we have begun to understand the passage can we move on to questions that try to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book or letter, and of course against the backdrop of the whole Bible.

Application. Then we move on to questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

Additional Comments

Do make use of clergy and commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when you are seeking to tackle Bible passages.

It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you some fresh insights into the verses which you are focusing on.

As we come to study the Bible we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: that is God’s plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.

Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to honour and glorify God.

Introduction to Philippians

'In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...' (Philippians 1:4-5)

In the days of email and text messaging the art of letter writing is in danger of falling into disuse. However, if my own experience is anything to go by, there is still one sort of letter that is still in good health – the thank-you letter. Every year just after Christmas or birthdays, I know my sister and her husband will ensure their two boys write to their uncle – maybe not a long letter, but a letter I always receive with gladness. At its simplest, this letter that Paul is writing to the Christians in Philippi is the same as that. It is a thank-you letter, written in grateful response to gifts he has received from them on hearing that he has been imprisoned in Rome (4:10-19). But as we will see as we study this letter over the next two terms it is also much more than that. Paul's gratitude to the Philippians stems from much more than just their recent gift – he is grateful because they have been, and have remained, partners in the gospel with him.

Philippi was a major Roman colony in the region of Macedonia. Originally named after King Philip II of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great), it had been re-founded as a Roman military colony by Octavian (who would go on to become Caesar Augustus) following two battles nearby in 42BC. Octavian repopulated the town with Roman war veterans and granted it the status of a Roman colony, giving all its inhabitants the rights of Roman citizens. By Paul's day the population was a mixture of Greek and Roman, with perhaps only a few Jews. Paul and Timothy had come there at the beginning of his mission to Macedonia (Acts 16:6ff), and quickly established a church there after sharing the gospel with Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth, and a jailer amongst others. How long Paul stayed there we don't know, but what is clear is that after he left a lasting bond of friendship remained

between him and that church.

When Paul comes to write this letter his circumstances have changed, and not for the better. It is clear he is in prison (1:13-14) and while the location of his imprisonment is debated, the most likely answer is that he is imprisoned under house-arrest in Rome, as described in Acts 28. That would date the letter at around 61AD. The Philippians have heard of his imprisonment and have sent Epaphroditus to Paul with gifts as a practical means of expressing their concern and support for him (4:10-19). Clearly this is not the first time they have given aid to Paul, indeed it sounds as if at one time they were the only church supporting his ministry (4:15). Paul even uses the generosity of the Macedonian churches as an example to others (2 Cor 8:1-5). However, Epaphroditus has been unwell, in fact seriously ill to the point of it being life-threatening, and the Philippians have heard of this (2:25-26). Through God's grace, he has recovered and now Epaphroditus is distressed to think the Philippians are worrying about him (2:26-27)! So Paul writes this letter and sends Epaphroditus back to Philippi with it both to say thank-you and to reunite them again (2:28).

In writing Paul combines both gratitude for past support with encouragement to keep going. He calls them partners in the gospel because they have shared in Paul's work of making the gospel known in an often hostile world. They have been partners by giving financially to support Paul's work, and they have also been partners in the sense that they too have been willing to suffer hardship and persecution for the sake of the gospel message in the same way that Paul has (1:29-30).

But the Philippian church is not perfect, and Paul is aware of issues that have the potential to threaten that partnership. There is a danger from false teaching – telling them that simple faith in Jesus Christ is not enough and that they need to become circumcised Jews as well (3:2-6). There is a danger from worldliness – so Paul must remind them that their true citizenship is in heaven (3:17-21) and not the Roman citizenship that most of the inhabitants of Philippi would have valued

so highly. There are also issues of disunity and conflict within the church, particularly between Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3) and Paul seeks a mediation between them. The key attribute that Paul is looking for throughout the letter is *humility*. Humility builds unity and defuses conflict because it stops us thinking we are better than others. Humility disarms worldliness because it teaches us to let go of what we strive after. Humility helped Paul to let go of his Jewish status he valued so much and consider everything loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus (3:7-8). And ultimately humility is shown to us by Jesus' own example in becoming a servant and coming to earth and dying on the cross (2:5-11). As the Philippians grow in humility they will grow in unity, able to stand firm together for the gospel, and they will continue to be Paul's gospel partners until the end. And Paul is confident that God will achieve that in them (1:3-6).

The message of Philippians is therefore very relevant to a church like Moulton in the situation we are currently facing. Like the Philippians, we have a track record of being a church that values the message of the gospel and wants to hold it out to a world in need. Like the Philippians, we have shared in partnership in the gospel with faithful ministers who have now moved on to new areas. And like the Philippians, we will need to tackle the challenges of worldliness, pride and disunity if we are to continue to stand firm for the gospel in the face of opposition or persecution. We will need God to help us to grow in new depths of humility, servant-heartedness and love for each other, so let us make it our prayer this term that He will.

Introductory questions:

- Read through the whole letter. What are the big themes which occur in the letter?
- Why do you think Paul wrote the letter? What are the main issues he deals with? What specific commands does he give?

It would also be very helpful to read through Acts 16:11-40 to get some of the background on Paul and his time in Philippi.

Study 1 – 1:1-8: A passion for partners in the Gospel

Study 2 – 1:8-11: Partners in prayer

Study 3 – 1:12-26: The priority of the Gospel

Study 4 – 1:27-2:4: Perfect unity

Study 5 – 2:5-11: The pattern of Jesus

Study 1 – 1:1-8: A passion for partners in the Gospel

1:1-2 Paul's greeting

As with modern letter writing New Testament letters follow a conventional form. First you identify yourself, next you state who you are writing to, before then going on to give a greeting. Paul does this in verses 1-2. It is interesting to note that of all the things Paul could have called himself (apostle, church leader, evangelist, etc.) Paul calls himself and Timothy servants. Specifically servants of Christ Jesus. It is worth contemplating for a moment just what that really means since it is that servant-hearted attitude that will underpin much of what Paul has to say in this letter. Paul knows that he has a master to whom he is accountable – Jesus Christ – and it is that knowledge that has shaped all of his priorities in life. Paul and Timothy have committed themselves to serving Jesus and to serving the gospel – the good news that Jesus has died and been raised again to deal decisively with the sin that separates God and man and makes forgiveness and a new life with God possible. It is because they are servants of Christ that they have travelled around the Mediterranean proclaiming that gospel and have ended up befriending the Philippians.

Paul goes on to address those he is writing to as 'saints'. He is not saying that they are perfect people or even that they are unusually good (how we often use the word). He just means that they are Christians. A saint is someone 'set apart' – here meaning a Christian, who once belonged to the world, following its rules and priorities, but now is set apart to belong to God. Jesus has taken them out of the kingdom of the world and brought them into God's kingdom. If we are genuine Christians then we too are saints. He also singles out two specific groups of Christians there: firstly *overseers* (literally bishops) which here means church leaders, and secondly *deacons* which means 'ones who serve', in other words church workers (you can look at 1 Timothy 3 to learn more).

In verse 2 Paul greets them with grace and peace from both God the Father and Jesus, God the Son. Whilst, as we have already said, a greeting here is customary, Paul's greeting emphasises right at the start of his letter the gospel that shapes all his thinking. Grace means a free gift, and in Christian thinking means the free gift of God's forgiveness that Jesus has purchased for us by his blood shed on the cross. Peace means peace with God as God's wrath is turned away and our guilt is removed by that same blood.

1:3-8 Paul's thankfulness

In verses 3-8 Paul gives thanks to God for his Philippian friends. He remembers them with joy and that joy inspires him to pray and give thanks to God for them. Why does he think of them in this way? Paul says in verse 5 that they have been partners with Paul in the gospel. They have shared in Paul's work of proclaiming the good news, and not only as a one-off thing, or an occasional activity. No, Paul says that for all the time he has known them, from the first day until now, they have been partners together in this way. And that of course is the nature of genuine partnership. True partners are in it together, and are in it for the long haul. Think about business partnerships or sporting partnerships. To be a genuine, worthwhile thing you need a partner who is in it with you long-term, through good times and bad, not about to turn their back on you when times get a bit tough. And the Philippians have been like that for Paul – standing with him in proclaiming the gospel, in the long-term and through good times and bad. And verse 7 begins to suggest that Paul has had some bad times – times in chains, imprisoned because he has been speaking out about Jesus – yet through it all the Philippians have stood by him. You cannot help but be struck by how much Paul values their friendship in this way and how much he cares about them. He talks both of his joy in them and his affection for them, but also his confidence that Jesus is at work in them (verse 6) as evidenced by their gospel partnership. Because of that, he is confident that Jesus will continue to be at work in them,

transforming their lives until **the day of Christ Jesus** – that is to say until Jesus returns at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. On that day Jesus' work in the Philippians will be complete and they, with Paul, will be ready to spend eternity with Him.

Do we feel the way Paul does about the other Christians that we know, that perhaps we meet with week by week in church? Often we don't. We long for the kind of deep, caring fellowship that Paul is describing here, but our actual experience is one of superficial acquaintances with whom we share the odd biscuit and cup of coffee on a Sunday before heading off again to separate weekly lives. Could it be that in order to know the kind of genuine fellowship that Paul describes we need to engage in the kind of gospel partnership that Paul and the Philippians shared in? Perhaps it is as we work together in sharing the gospel, supporting and encouraging each other, in it for the long-haul and ready to keep going through good times and bad times, that our relationships might be truly built up and deepened?

Initial questions (Philippians 1:1-8):

- If you were to write a letter to Moulton church, what would prompt you to thank God?
- What do we learn about Paul and who he is?
- What do we learn about who Paul is writing to and how he feels about them?
- Why does Paul thank God? In what ways have the Philippians been partners in the Gospel? (See also chapter 4:14-18)
- Why does Paul describe it as 'partnership in the Gospel' (verse 5)? If Paul knew you, would he describe you as a partner in the Gospel? Why / why not?
- Why does Paul thank God, rather than the Philippians? What has God done, according to verses 3-8? What will God do? Why do you think Paul is telling the Philippians he is thanking God for them?
- From what we have seen of the fellowship of Paul and the Philippians what might be some practical ways we can express and deepen our fellowship -
 - With our friends?
 - With people in our church?
 - With people we know serving Christ around the world?

Study 2 – 1:9-11: Partners in prayer

Introduction

Last time Paul gave us a glimpse of his relationship with Philippians and we saw how they had shared with Paul in his gospel work. Out of this common purpose a strong and close bond had been built up. Paul had spoken of how he had always given thanks to God for them in his prayers and prayed joyfully for them (verses 3-4). Now in the next three verses Paul shares with the Philippians the content of his prayers for them. This may be a short passage, but there is certainly plenty for us to get our teeth into!

1:9 More Love

First of all Paul prays that their love **may abound more and more**. Love here is not a fluffy romantic feeling, but rather it is a key Christian characteristic. God is love (1 John 4:16) and God has demonstrated the depth of His love by sending His Son to die on the cross to save us (John 3:16). More than that, He did not wait for a sinful world to become good before sending His Son to die for it and save it, but rather, while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). That is the measure of God's love, and the standard to which Paul wants the Philippians love to grow towards. That is not something they can achieve on their own – only a work of God can develop and sustain such love – hence Paul prays that God will be at work and give the Philippians an abundance of this love.

This love is also to be linked to growth **in knowledge and depth of insight**. God's love is neither sentimental nor blind and so our love needs to be linked to growing wisdom and understanding too. Love is to be worked out in practical actions but how are we to know what course of action is for the best in all the complex circumstances of real life? That will require another gift from God – not just to be able to *love* in the way God loves, but also to be able to *think* in the way God

does. Then we will not just *feel* the right things, but also *know* what is right. This is not simply a matter of academic study, reading the right books, and so on (although reading good Christian books is a good thing!). No, what Paul has in mind is another work of God, transforming not just our hearts, but our heads as well, aligning our thinking with God's thinking.

1:10 More perfect

Verse 10 develops the theme further. The feeling and thinking that Paul prays for growth in (verse 9) must be combined so that we can **discern what is best** and work out what to do for the best in all the complex circumstances of life. Notice again the high standard that we are called to – we are not simply to avoid what is bad, and work out something good to do, we are to work out what is *best*. We are to be *godly* in our thinking – like God – and so discern what God thinks is best in any given situation. Our aim is to be **pure and blameless** – completely free from any hint of evil or wickedness, and not open to any accusation from those around us because of our actions. But don't imagine that the goal here is just to impress those around us with our love, wisdom and right actions. No, the one we are trying to please is the Lord Jesus, because there is a day in the future, the **day of Christ**, when he will return and we will have to give an account of ourselves before him. And so there is a need for us to be ready for Jesus' return.

1:11 More fruit

Paul looks forward to that day, the day of Christ, confident that God will answer all that he has prayed for so far for the Philippians. And so, confident that the Philippians will be growing in love, knowledge and discernment, he prays for the natural end result of that – fruitful lives. All those other things are worthless if they don't result in action so Paul prays that they do. He asks that the Philippians be **filled with the fruit of righteousness**. Notice that it is a bumper harvest that Paul is asking

for. Notice as well that it **comes through Jesus Christ**. It is only by being connected to Jesus, belonging to him, that we can expect to be fruitful. Remember the picture of the vine in John 15 – Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. If the branches are attached to the vine then they will bear fruit. If the branches are not attached, then they are dead and are only fit for going in the brown wheelie-bin!

Also notice that all of this is to be done **to the glory and praise of God**. That is God's ultimate goal for us, that we bring glory and praise to Him. He has saved us because in doing so He demonstrates His loving, merciful character and that brings glory to Him. He works in us to change and transform us and make us more like Christ because in that way we reflect more of His character and so bring glory to Him. We are to bear fruit as we live out our lives because that way we demonstrate God's power at work in us and so bring glory and praise to Him. So we see that Paul's prayer is completely gospel-centred. As we do these things, growing in love and working it through into words and actions that bear fruit for Him, the gospel is proclaimed and demonstrated to the world around us. And as we will see next time that is Paul's top priority.

If this all sounds impossibly hard to you then I am not surprised. It sounds impossibly hard to me too. In fact it is impossibly hard. That is why this is a prayer, rather than a set of commands for us to follow. Paul prays these things for the Philippians because he knows that only God at work in them can transform them and make these things possible for them. And the same is true for us. Sometimes people wear little wristbands with 'WWJD' written on them, which stands for, 'what would Jesus do?'. It is a good question to be asking yourself. But we need more than that. If we are to become truly Christ-like in our feeling, thinking, discernment and doing then we will need to do more than just ask ourselves that question. We will need to pray that God would work in us to give us the things Paul prays for here, to make us more like Jesus, and so know what Jesus would do, and put it into

practice ourselves.

Initial questions (Philippians 1:9-11):

- What encourages you to pray? Who do you pray for, and for what sorts of things?
- Draw a diagram (flow chart) to show visually how the different parts of Paul's prayer fit together. How does each part connect with the next? What would be the result if any part was missing?
- What is Paul's overall perspective in this prayer? What time-scale does he have in mind? What must happen between now and then if Christians are to be pure and blameless when Jesus returns?
- What does Paul want most for these Christians (v11)? What end result is Paul seeking? How does the Philippians being fruitful link with Paul's view of the Philippians as partners in the Gospel?
- In what ways should our prayers change to reflect both the scope of Paul's prayer and also his priorities here? Compare with your answer to the first question...

Study 3 – 1:12-26: The priority of the Gospel

1:12-18 The present

Part of the reason Paul has for writing this letter to his friends in Philippi is because they have learnt of his imprisonment in Rome and have naturally become concerned about him. In chapter 4 we learn that they have sent Epaphroditus to Paul with gifts, and in response Paul wants to write and reassure them about his circumstances. Paul may be in chains (verse 14) but amazingly he writes to the Philippians to encourage them that it is not altogether a bad thing. Paul's priorities become clear in verse 12 – **what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel**. Paul might be imprisoned but the message of the gospel has not been bound at all. Paul has been able to explain the reason for his imprisonment to the soldiers guarding him. These are the palace guard (verse 13), Caesar's own elite troops. Since the guards would have been rotated, maybe as often as every four hours, Paul has had a nearly inexhaustible supply of people to share his faith with. He says that the whole palace guard now knows that he is in chains for Christ. That could have been as many as several thousand soldiers! What is more, other Christians have also seen Paul's courage in facing prison and have decided to copy that courage – they have also been speaking out about Jesus (verse 14). As a result the gospel message in being spread more widely than Paul could have managed on his own had he been free. The gospel is advancing and Paul wants his Philippian friends to be encouraged by that.

But from the sounds of things in verses 15-17 some of the people speaking out about Jesus are doing it out of ill-will. While some preach Christ out of love, others **preach Christ out of selfish ambition**, hoping to get Paul into more trouble and so enhance their own position in the church. You might think Paul would commend one group and condemn the other. But amazingly Paul shows his priorities again – as long as Christ is preached, as long as the gospel is proclaimed, Paul doesn't

care if the motives behind it are to support him or get him into more trouble. What matters is the gospel, and his own circumstances are secondary.

So he rejoices, despite having good reasons to complain. We should not take that lightly or think that Paul is being glib. He knows he has much he could complain about if he wanted to. Prison is surely not an enjoyable experience, even if this particular spell is house arrest rather than damp prison cell. The thought of others deliberately using their preaching to try to create trouble is something that would cause anger and anxiety in anyone. But amazingly Paul stays focussed on his priority. He wants the gospel to spread and grow and the result of Paul's troubles is that the gospel is prospering. So in Paul's mind the appropriate response is to rejoice.

1:18-26 The future

Paul now turns to think about the future. He expresses his confidence that he will soon be released (verse 19) and his gratitude for the help and support he has received both from God, by His Spirit, and from knowing that the Philippians are praying for him. But verse 20 gives us a telling glimpse into Paul's personal fears. He knows that his impending trial could go badly for him and, worst case, he might face death. Certainly other Christians had already been martyred for their faith. What is on his mind is that he might not **be ashamed but will have sufficient courage** for whatever he might have to face. We might imagine Paul as some kind of super-Christian who never felt doubt or temptation or uncertainty. But no, he too felt the pressure to give in, to water down his gospel message or even abandon it completely and so avoid any risk of further conflict with the authorities. But to do so would mean that Paul would no longer be **exalting Christ in his body** – no longer living his life to bring worship to Jesus. But he expresses confidence that this will not happen – confidence based not on his own strength of character, but on the strength afforded him by God's Spirit

and the prayers of the Philippians.

The prospect of his own death brings Paul back to his gospel priorities again and one of his most famous statements – **for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain**. He goes on to explain what he means – that for Paul living means serving Christ and fruitful labour in proclaiming the gospel. And to die means being with Christ in heaven. Being with Christ is better for Paul, but he reasons that God still has work for him to do on earth, serving amongst others the Philippians. So he gets back to his original conclusion – that his imprisonment will end in his release and that he and the Philippians will be joyfully reunited once more (verse 26).

These verses make a deep challenge to our priorities in life. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. How many of us could, hand on heart, really say that? Often for us to live is Christ, plus work, plus family, plus our interests, sports, hobbies etc. Those things are not wrong in and of themselves. But are we ready, like Paul, to let everything else take second place and let our lives be for Christ and him alone? And do we really think that to die is gain? Or are we still so tightly attached to this world and its culture of materialism that we think that to die is loss? Whatever we value now, wealth, status, career, house, family, car, we will one day lose. But we will gain much more in return. We will be with Christ for ever. You may have heard of Jim Elliott. He was young man who, in the 1950's, gave up a comfortable western life to bring the message of the gospel to the Auca people of Ecuador. He wrote in his journal that 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose'. He died soon after at the hands of the very tribe he had been working with, although in time others, including his widow Elizabeth, were able to continue his work. They were ready to share Paul's priorities. Are we?

Initial questions (Philippians 1:12-26):

- Do you see yourself as ambitious? What are your ambitions and what do they show about your priorities in life – ie. what you think of as most important?
- Why has Paul's imprisonment in Rome actually not been a bad thing in Paul's eyes?
- What motives did different people have in preaching Christ? Why did Paul rejoice? Do we rejoice to see the gospel preached?
- How do verses 12-18 show us what really mattered most of all to Paul?
- What were the possible outcomes for Paul following his imprisonment? What does he feel about each of them?
- Put verse 21 in your own words. Why is to live Christ – what would it mean for Paul? Why is to die gain?
- Paul feels torn, but what matters most to Paul? Why?
- Do we share Paul's priorities? How should these verses challenge our priorities? How can these verses encourage us when we face opposition as Christians?

Study 4 – 1:27-2:4: Perfect unity

1:27-30 Suffering for the gospel

Paul is thanking God for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel; he has told the Philippians what he is praying for them (verses 9-11), he has demonstrated how he is living out his gospel priorities in his own life (verses 12-26), and now he goes on to instruct them on how they should be living. As we will see, their immediate problem is that, like Paul, they too are suffering for the gospel. So Paul tells them what they need to do in verse 27: **Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.** So don't be deflected by your present circumstances, whatever hardships you might face, make sure your actions continue to be consistent with the gospel message you are proclaiming. Reading on it seems like the issue Paul particularly has in mind is that of *unity*. He wants to be confident that in his absence the Philippian Christians will be standing **firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.** It is so true isn't it that when we feel under pressure, we can so easily become short tempered and irritable with those closest to us, even when those people are exactly the ones most able to give us the support we need to keep going under pressure. That can be true in our family lives, and it can also, sadly, be true in our church family. Our faith comes under pressure, and we react by finding fault with our Christian brothers and sisters, losing our temper with them, when actually we need to rely more on each other for strength and comfort and we need to encourage one another to remain focused on our common task of holding out the gospel. Well Paul makes sure the Philippians know what they need to do. Stand firm together, he says, don't be frightened by those opposing you, and this will be a **sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved.** Paul is saying that Christian unity, and particularly unity under opposition, is part of proclaiming the gospel message. It makes clear that those doing the opposing have set themselves against Christ, and

against all those who follow him. Moreover, it also makes clear that the faith of the Christian is genuine, not a fair-weather faith that gives up at the first sign of trouble. True faith stands firm and stands together when trouble comes. False Christianity attracts no opposition because it never opposes the me-first, whatever-makes-me-happy worldview of those around us. Genuine Christianity, as it proclaims Jesus is Lord over every aspect of life, does attract opposition because it tells people that they need to change. Both Paul and the Philippians had attracted that kind of opposition because they had been faithful in proclaiming that gospel. And Paul wants them to view that as an encouragement, like a seal of authenticity applied to their faith from the Lord Jesus. **For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.** They can be encouraged because they are not alone in suffering for the gospel – they are going through the same struggles as their friend and partner in the gospel, Paul.

2:1-4 Unity through humility

Paul now goes on to delve a little deeper into *how* the Philippians are to build up their unity. This is important because unity does not come naturally in any Christian community – it needs to be worked at. That is perhaps not surprising if you think about it. Any church family is made up from people from all sorts of backgrounds, different walks of life, different ages, different gifts, abilities, different interests. In fact the *only* thing they have in common is wanting to learn more about Jesus and to follow him. It is very easy in a church to look around and see all the differences and things that might potentially divide us, rather than the single thing that unites us – Jesus. So we must always work at unity. Paul motivates them to unity in a number of ways. First he makes them think about their common benefits in knowing Christ as Lord and Saviour. They are to contemplate the **encouragement, comfort and fellowship** they have experienced by being united with

Christ, and by having been given his Spirit to live within each of them. God has also given them **tenderness and compassion** within their own hearts so Paul urges them to live these things out by being fully united with one another in mind, love, spirit and purpose (v2). Paul also appeals to them on a personal level – **make my joy complete** – he says by working towards a common mindset, a common love and a common purpose. Finally they are to realise that the enemy of unity is self-interest and the antidote that is humility. **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.** It is so easy to look at others in the church and to imagine that we are better than them. Perhaps if we have a better job, or a bigger house or newer car than others. To our shame it can even be because we think we have a more 'important' position within the life of the church than others. And so because of our selfish ambition we imagine we are better. Or we look at others and see that we have sacrificed a promotion at work to give us more time for church activities, or avoided the pitfalls of materialism by living in a smaller house and driving an old, battered car. And in our vain conceit we imagine that we are better. We need a strong dose of humility to deflate our egos, and a willingness to let go of our own self-interest and to start putting the interests of others ahead of our own. Only then will we be able to build the sort of loving, supportive, united church that Paul is looking for – a church that can stand united against opposition as it holds out the gospel.

Initial questions (Philippians 1:27-2:4):

- Think about your close friends. What are the things that you have in common with them that makes them your friend?
- What did we learn about Paul's circumstances and priorities in verses 12-26? From verse 27 how does Paul want the Philippians to respond? How does Paul's life help us to understand what verse 27 is going to look like in practice?
- Why might some Christians want to stop living like this? What does Paul say will happen if instead we persevere (v28)?
- How would verses 29-30 have been an encouragement to the Philippians to keep going even when they were facing opposition? How are they an encouragement to us?
- How does Paul want their unity to grow in 2:1-4? How might their attitudes need to change? How might their actions need to change?
- Why are these attitudes necessary for genuine unity? Do these verses help us to understand some of the causes of disunity?
- Looking at the passage as a whole, why is unity in the church so important?
- Looking back to verses 27-30 what is their common purpose to be?

Study 5 – 2:5-11: The pattern of Jesus

2:5 Be like Jesus!

Paul's big theme has been partnership in the gospel, thanking the Philippians for the way that they have stood with him and supported him in the past and encouraging them to keep standing firm for the gospel in the future no matter what opposition they face. In order to do that, they will need to be united, contending together for the faith. We saw last time that, in order to achieve that, they will need an attitude of humility; putting others first, abandoning selfish ambition and the conceit of thinking they are better than others. Paul now sums up all of that in one simple command – **your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus**. Simple, just be like Jesus! We might be tempted to view this as Paul being slightly glib, much like the football manager who when faced with his team's defeat just says something like, 'well next time we just need to go out and score more goals than the other team' Obvious, but not very helpful. No, Paul is not simply saying we need to be like Jesus as a statement of the obvious. He is, I think, doing several things. He wants us to look at Jesus to see just how far we have still to go at working towards unity and a humble attitude. It is hard to be humble if you think you are nearly perfect, so first look at Jesus and see just how far short we still fall. That will make humility easier. Paul also wants to remind us what Jesus has done for us so that gratitude will motivate us to work hard at honouring Jesus through our unity. In addition Paul will also go on later to remind us that God is at work in us (2:13). As we look at Jesus, being like him might seem like an impossible task. Well it is, at least for us in our own strength. But with God all things are possible (Matt 19:26).

In the next few verses Paul will unpack just what Jesus' attitude is.

2:6-8 Jesus was humble and obedient to his Father even if that meant death on the cross

Verse 6 makes explicit the fact that Jesus is fully God, with all the power, majesty and authority that is implied by that. And yet he is ready to let go of all of that, if that is what is required of him. God the Son was ready, out of loving obedience to God the Father to surrender his status as ruler of the universe and become nothing, a human, a servant. The phrase **made himself nothing** is more literally 'emptied himself'. His attitude was the opposite of the generation X attitude that always demands 'my rights' and insists on doing things 'my way'. Jesus was ready to let go of his status and rights as God, and in obedience to do whatever his Father needed him to do. Even to go to a degrading, humiliating death on the cross. That is the measure of Jesus' humility and obedience. **He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross**. And Paul says that our attitude should be the same as that. Remember too that for Jesus humility and obedience have a purpose. Death on a cross means bringing the hope of salvation to a fallen world – that was why God the Father asked it of him, and why he willingly obeyed.

I wonder, are we ready for that? Is our obedience, our humility, of that magnitude? Not yet, I'm sure, but are we wanting God to grow in us that same attitude and purpose so that we can aspire to be truly Christ-like? Think for a moment just what a difference it would make for us, for our church, for our home groups, for our world, if we did. We would be ready to humbly lay down our lives for others. We would let go of the me-first, my-rights attitude that characterises our culture. We would be ready to be united with other Christians in common purpose, partners in the gospel striving for the salvation of all who don't yet believe.

2:9-11 Jesus is exalted for the Father's glory

Our humility and obedience are not yet perfect. But Jesus was perfect

in both and successfully carried out his Father's plan of going to the cross to die for the world. We often think about the results of that obedient death for us. But verses 9-11 tell us the result for Jesus, and for God the Father.

First, Jesus is vindicated and his status is restored. God exalts (to praise or promote in rank) Jesus to **the highest place** and gives him **the name that is above every name**. He restores to Jesus all the status he gave up in coming to the earth. He also shows that his death on the cross was not the shameful defeat of a common criminal that it might have appeared to be, but rather that Jesus is now the King to whom everyone owes their allegiance. On the last day, when Jesus returns, every knee will finally bow to Jesus, some willingly, some unwillingly, but nevertheless **every knee should bow** and **every tongue confess** (everyone will acknowledge) that Jesus is Lord. Jesus will be seen for who he truly is – King of all creation.

Second, as Jesus is vindicated, God the Father receives glory too. The Father's plan, completed by Jesus, will bring glory to Him as it reveals the Father's power, justice and compassion working together to deal with sin, and yet save sinful people at the same time. That is the ultimate purpose of the gospel – to bring glory to God the Father. In our self-centredness we still sometimes think that the gospel is all about *us*, how great it is that God has saved *us*. But no, great though that is, if we are to have the same attitude as Jesus we need to take our eyes off ourselves and focus again on holding out the gospel to the world so that *God will be glorified* as people respond in faith to what Jesus has done for them.

Initial questions (Philippians 2:5-11):

- What did we learn last time about the importance of Christian unity?
- What characteristics of Jesus is Paul emphasising here?
- How does Jesus demonstrate genuine humility (v6-8)?
 - How do these verses help to add to our understanding of what the cross cost Jesus?
 - Why might Jesus have been justified in not wanting to come to earth and go to the cross?
- How does God the Father respond to Jesus' actions (v9-11)?
 - What is the end result for Jesus?
 - What is the end result for God the Father?
- What therefore does it mean for us to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus (v5)?
- How will that attitude change your priorities in your daily life?
 - At work? At home? In the church?
- How does having this attitude help us to build unity and be partners in the Gospel in the way that Paul is wanting in this letter (1v27)?