

Partners for Life

Philippians



**8 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

Partners for life

Philippians

by Tim Thorburn

Partners for life

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd. ACN 067 558 365)

PO Box 225

Kingsford NSW 2032

Australia

Telephone: (02) 9663 1478; international: +61 2 9663 1478

Facsimile: (02) 9663 3265; international: +61 2 9663 3265

Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

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How to make the most of these studies

1. What is an interactive Bible study?

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through Philippians, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall half-way between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot 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. The format

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read.

Interspersed throughout the teaching are three types of ‘interaction’, each with its own symbol:



For starters

Questions to help you think about society and your own experience, in a way that tunes you in to the issues being raised by the Bible passage.



Investigate

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



Think it through

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

3. Suggestions for individual study

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in Philippians and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

4. Suggestions for group study

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and threesomes. Get together with a friend/s and work through them at your own pace. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- It is *vital* that group members 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!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*For starters*, *Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of Philippians, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

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Philippians 1:1–8

Partners in the gospel

Overview of Philippians

This Bible letter was written by the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. It is relatively short, which gives us the opportunity to begin these studies with a bird's eye view of it.

Read through the entire letter and answer the following questions. If you are part of a study group, you might like to do this section *before* your first gathering.



Investigate

1. What do we learn about the relationship between Paul and the Philippian Christians? How does Paul feel about them?
2. Is the Philippian church facing any major difficulties? What from?
3. Why did Paul write the letter?

4. What are the main topics of the letter? Who is it about? What is it about?

5. One of the key phrases in the letter is “the gospel”. What role does the gospel play in Paul’s life? What role does/should it play in the Philippians’ lives?

6. Although Paul talks about himself quite a lot, the central person in the letter is Christ. What does Christ mean to Paul, and which verse(s) capture this?

A shared identity and purpose

In these days of internet business, international companies and jet travel, it is not unusual for people to be partners in business, but to live on opposite sides of the world. The manager may work from Tokyo, while the sales staff operate out of New York. Regardless of their location, they are all still held together in partnership by their common goal: to serve the good of their company or product.

The apostle Paul uses the word “partnership” to describe his relationship with the Philippians (1:5). He also uses a similar idea in 1:7 (“partakers”). The biblical word is usually used of business partnerships—it is the relationship that develops from being partners in a particular enterprise or a property. It means that there is some kind of shared endeavour that holds the two parties together. Even when separated by imprisonment, he and the Philippians have a shared identity and purpose.



Investigate

Read Philippians 1:1-8.

1. What do we learn about how Paul felt about the Philippian Christians? Why does he feel like this about them?
2. What are Paul and the Philippians partners in—what do they share in common? (Also read Philippians 4:10-19.)
3. “Partnership” is mentioned in verse 5 (ESV). What does this section teach us about why Paul wrote this letter?
4. How have the Philippians expressed their partnership with Paul? What do you think motivated them to do this?
5. When did their partnership start? How long has it been going? Did it stop when Paul left Philippi?

6. What have the Philippians contributed to the partnership?

7. What has Paul contributed to the partnership?

8. How do you think such a positive and warm relationship has developed between Paul and the Philippians?

9. What light does this shed on:

- the cause of Paul's joy (1:4)?

- Paul's confidence (1:6)?

- Paul's affection for them (1:7-8)?

The word ‘partnership’ is often correctly translated, ‘fellowship’. But ‘fellowship’ is a word Christians throw around with happy abandon. We have ‘fellowship times’ after the service, “Fellowship Rooms” 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 Phil 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, economic affluence (and hair style), what we share in common is far more significant than these differences. The disappointing thing is that we so rarely experience the fellowship that Christ has created. It is easier and more comfortable to experience “weather fellowship” or “football fellowship” than Christian fellowship.

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 puts out chairs, another twiddles knobs on the PA, someone else proclaims Christ through that PA to those sitting on the chairs, while another foots the bill, 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 church outreach events.

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 focussing on the thing we hold in common. And what a terrific by-product it is!

