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**BIBLE
STUDY**
NOTES

Week 3: Paul's Imprisonment Is for the Greater Good (Phil. 1:12–18)

The Place of the Passage

After Paul's introductory words of greeting and thankfulness, he turns to one of his main purposes in writing this letter: to update the Philippian church on his welfare—"I want you to know . . . what has happened to me" ([Phil. 1:12](#)). They were concerned for Paul in these days of imprisonment. In [Philippians 1:12–26](#), Paul seeks to assure them, first with news that the gospel is spreading ([Phil. 1:12–18](#)), then by modeling confidence in God's sovereignty over life and death ([Phil. 1:19–26](#)).

Definition: Sovereignty

Supreme and independent power and authority. Sovereignty over all things is a distinctive attribute of God ([1 Tim. 6:15–16](#)). He directs all things to carry out his purposes ([Rom. 8:28–29](#)).

The Big Picture

In [Philippians 1:12–18](#), Paul encourages the church with the news that the gospel is spreading, not despite his imprisonment but *through* it—and this is all that matters.

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Gospel Glimpses

A CONVICTING EXAMPLE, A COMFORTING GOSPEL. Paul’s singularly focused concern for the cause of Christ and his gospel is in sharp contrast to our puny efforts and quick complaints. Paul’s radical example is convicting. That is not an inappropriate response. God is good when his Word exposes our sin and draws us into repentant confession and humility. We should be reproved by Paul’s bold example. But we should also be comforted by the very gospel he so radically preached. Jesus died for sins, including the sins of cowardice, selfishness, joylessness, and complaining. This is the gospel that we have heard and believed and received as Christians. Paul provides a lofty, convicting example, but he too is motivated by a gloriously comforting gospel.

THE GOSPEL IS FREEING AND FIXATING. In the midst of imprisonment and opposition, Paul’s joy ([Phil. 1:18](#)) is otherworldly. Only the gospel can free us from focusing on our circumstances and then fixate our hearts on Christ and his cause in this world.

Paul shows us the power of the gospel to bring supernatural joy because of spiritual realities. As he wrote to the Corinthians, “we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” ([2 Cor. 4:18](#)).

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Whole-Bible Connections

THE ADVANCE OF THE GOSPEL. The gospel is supposed to spread. It is good news to be proclaimed freely, widely, and boldly. Jesus issued this call to his followers multiple times ([Matt. 28:18-20](#); [Luke 24:47-48](#); [Acts 1:8](#)). But the idea of salvation spreading in the world was promised and foreshadowed all through the Old Testament, beginning with God's promises to Abraham (see [Gen. 12:3](#)). Throughout the Old Testament God had a unique covenantal relationship with the nation of Israel, but all along there was a growing anticipation that God's saving program would eventually reach the Gentile nations; one day "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord" ([Hab. 2:14](#)).

Very early in Jesus' earthly ministry he made it clear that this time of globally spreading glory had begun. He came not for the "righteous," but for "sinners" ([Luke 5:32](#))—regardless of their ethnicity. This Old Testament background combined with Jesus' model and teaching formed Paul's aim to "preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named" ([Rom. 15:20](#)). That is why he preached the gospel in Philippi ([Acts 16:11-34](#)), and why he eventually left Philippi for the next city. That is why he rejoiced in his Roman imprisonment and the spread of the gospel among Roman guards ([Phil. 1:12-13](#)).

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OPPOSITION TO THE GOSPEL. God’s redemptive plan for the nations is not always met with belief and joy. Paul wrote Philippians while imprisoned for Christ. The frequency and severity of the persecution he had previously faced was simply remarkable (read [2 Cor. 11:23–27](#)). But it was not surprising in light of Jesus’ opposition and cruel death ([John 15:20](#)).

Like the *advance* of the gospel, *opposition* to it has a long history in the Bible. That’s why the early church, when persecuted and threatened, looked back to [Psalm 2](#) to remember the promise of human opposition to God’s ways and to encourage themselves by dwelling on the futility of that opposition ([Acts 4:25–28](#)). The coming of the true, anointed King inevitably results in both salvation and opposition.

Theological Soundings

THE GOSPEL. The word “gospel,” the basic label for Paul’s message, is used throughout Philippians. More often, though, the concept of the gospel is put in slightly different terms. For instance, it is “the word” in [Philippians 1:14](#) and simply “Christ” in [Philippians 1:15, 17, 18](#). These different words shed light on what the gospel is. It is “good news,” a “word” to “speak” ([Phil. 1:14](#)), to “preach” ([Phil. 1:15](#)), to be “proclaimed” ([Phil. 1:17–18](#)). More specifically, it is an announcement of a person—Christ, the Messiah. More specifically still, it regards his person and work: that he lived righteously, died horribly, and rose

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victoriously for the salvation of his people. Our hope is completely and solely in him. This is good news to be heard, embraced, celebrated, and retold.

SOVEREIGNTY AND PROVIDENCE. Not once in this passage does Paul say explicitly that God has sovereignly placed him in prison for his good and for the gospel’s spread. There’s no need to say this; it is obvious. God sovereignly orchestrated the evil of men and the gospel-passion of Christians for a gospel-spreading good that no one could plan or stumble into. The doctrine of God’s sovereignty insists that God is in complete control of everything.

The overlapping doctrine of God’s providence teaches that God is good, wise, and purposeful in his sovereignty; his plan is for our good and his glory. Paul’s imprisonment is an example of these things, but Jesus’ death is the ultimate instance. Though “killed by the hands of lawless men,” he was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” ([Acts 2:23](#)). His crucifiers plotted in vain, for they did only what God himself “had predestined to take place” ([Acts 4:25–28](#)).

Definition: Gospel

A common translation for a Greek word meaning “good news”—that is, the good news of Jesus Christ and the salvation he made possible by his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Gospel with an initial capital letter refers to each of the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life on earth (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John).

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Definition: Providence

God's good, wise, and sovereign guidance and control of all things, by which he supplies all our needs and accomplishes his holy will.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of [Philippians 1:12-18](#) for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [Philippians 1:12-18](#)

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Philippians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, reflecting on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you and noting things to review again in the future.

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