

# GUIDELINES

**BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S  
MINISTRY AND MISSION**

**JANUARY–APRIL 2025**

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# GUIDELINES

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Edited by Rachel Tranter and Olivia Warburton

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Ministries

15 The Chambers, Vineyard  
Abingdon OX14 3FE  
brf.org.uk | 01865 319700

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# Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Ministries prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk), phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

# Writers in this issue

**Walter Moberly** is emeritus professor of theology and biblical interpretation at Durham University. He has recently written *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age* and *The God of the Old Testament* (both published by Baker Academic).

**Sharon Prentis** is deputy director of the Church of England's Racial Justice Unit (RJU). Prior to joining the RJU, she was dean of ministry at St Mellitus Theological College. Sharon has also served as a priest and is a vocal advocate for authentic leadership and justice.

**Valerie Hobbs** is a linguist at the University of Sheffield and author of *An Introduction to Religious Language* and *No Love in War: A story of Christian nationalism*. In her spare time, she writes about the Bible at [lampofthelamb.com](http://lampofthelamb.com).

**Victoria Omotso** is a cross-cultural research scholar whose work explores post-colonial discourse through biblical reception. She is an honorary research fellow at the University of Exeter, a tutor at the University of Southampton and a visiting lecturer at Sarum College and the London School of Theology.

**Peter Hatton** is a former tutor at Bristol Baptist College, where he taught after 25 years in Methodist ministry. Preaching, continuing teaching, writing projects and looking after grandchildren are keeping him occupied in 'retirement'.

**Siobhán Jolley** is a specialist in the portrayal of Mary Magdalene. She is a research fellow in art and religion at the National Gallery, visiting lecturer at King's College, London, and an honorary research fellow at the University of Manchester.

**David Spriggs** has been a Baptist Minister for over 50 years, serving in six different churches. For 20 of those years, he worked for the Evangelical Alliance and Bible Society. He has three married children and ten grandchildren.

**M. J. Kramer** is chaplain of Keble College, Oxford, having previously served as precentor of Canterbury Cathedral. His academic interests include classics, biblical studies, and Hellenistic Judaism. He is also author of *The Canterbury Book of New Parish Prayers*.

**Loveday C. A. Alexander** is professor emerita of biblical studies at the University of Sheffield, and canon-theologian emerita of Chester Cathedral. She is currently serving as a parish priest in Chester Diocese.

**Andrew Smith** is the director of interfaith relations for the bishop of Birmingham and founded the youth charity The Feast. He has been involved in various interfaith ministry since the mid-1990s.

# The editors write...



Welcome to this new issue of *Guidelines* as we enter a new year!

In this issue, we continue our study of Luke alongside Loveday Alexander. Taking us through from the end of Jesus' teaching ministry in Galilee to the resurrection, Loveday helps us to see the cost of the path of peace that Jesus must tread. Max Kramer also travels with us on our journey through Lent with his notes on dealing with difficulty: how can the sufferings we observe in the Bible help shape how we understand the relationship between suffering and God, others, and ourselves? Meanwhile, Sharon Prentis helps us to see the joy of living for Christ in her notes on Philipians.

In the Old Testament, we study Leviticus, a book which many of us may regard with either dread or indifference! Peter Hatton helps us through this difficult book to see its countercultural encouragement towards holiness. Walter Moberly helps us to read and understand Nehemiah, which takes place at a time when those who followed God felt decentralised and irrelevant – a timely parallel to post-Christendom today. Following our series on New Testament prayers in the previous issue, Valerie Hobbs takes us through a series on Old Testament prayers, helping us to resist the dominant culture of neoliberalism and pray in a way that honours God rather than ourselves.

Two further timely sets of notes encourage us to think about relevant issues. Andrew Smith's notes on multifaith engagement help us to position ourselves in a world where the numbers of those following other faiths are rising much faster than Christianity. How do we engage with people of other faiths with integrity and respect? Meanwhile, Victoria Omotoso looks at the important topic of faith and culture, taking seriously Jesus' prayer in John 17 for unity alongside holiness.

Finally, David Spriggs gives us a fascinating series on Christian giving, while Siobhán Jolley brings us a new perspective on the much-maligned character of Mary Magdalene.

As ever, all of our contributors aim to bring you closer to the person and love of God.

Rachel

Olivia

## The prayer of BRF Ministries

*Faithful God,  
thank you for growing BRF Ministries  
from small beginnings  
into the worldwide family it is today.  
We rejoice as young and old  
discover you through your word  
and grow daily in faith and love.  
Keep us humble in your service,  
ambitious for your glory  
and open to new opportunities.  
For your name's sake.  
Amen.*

### Helping to pay it forward

As part of our Living Faith ministry, we're raising funds to give away copies of Bible reading notes and other resources to those who aren't able to access them any other way, working with food banks and chaplaincy services, in prisons, hospitals and care homes.

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If you've enjoyed and benefited from our resources, would you consider paying it forward to enable others to do so too?

Make a gift at [brf.org.uk/donate](https://brf.org.uk/donate)

# Philippians: the joy of living for Christ



Sharon Prentis

Sometimes it can feel hard to be joyful in the midst of life's challenges. Individual experiences, not to mention the state of the world we live in, can make joy seem elusive or inappropriate. Nevertheless, the joy referred to in the Bible comes from the belief that no matter what happens, God is always present and working out all things for good. The psalmist proclaimed, 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning' (Psalm 30:5, NKJV), and this perspective can help us find peace and hope amid even the most troubling of situations. The book of Philippians is often referred to as a letter of joy, written for times when courage and strength was particularly needed. It was written to encourage the original hearers to remain faithful, pursue the person and power of Jesus Christ, and appreciate how the knowledge of him brings peace and emboldens lives. Over the next two weeks, we will explore the truths presented in this letter, to increase our understanding of what it means to live in joy during tough times and the joy that comes from seeking God with all our heart (Jeremiah 29:13). Through the apostle Paul's writings, we are encouraged to express joy in the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord in whatever situations we find ourselves. The challenge here is to focus on the Messiah as redeemer and his message of hope, not on anything else. Paul's proclamation, 'to live is Christ' (1:21), reminds us to view our current circumstances from an eternal perspective, with the knowledge that we are never alone.

On some occasions, passages have been revisited to draw out different perspectives. Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NKJV.



# 1 Finding joy when others share

## Philippians 1:1–18

In this rousing opening to Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, the word joy, which goes on to be a significant theme, is mentioned for the first time (Philippians 1:4). Together with its verbal form, rejoice, it will be used over 14 times in this letter, more often than in any other of Paul's letters. Paul writes to express his gratitude to God for the people of Philippi who have generously supported his ministry. He does this by praying for their well-being and growth as followers of Jesus Christ and by encouraging them through teaching the faith. His focus is on others rather than on himself; in this way, Paul encourages leaders to look beyond their immediate personal concerns to those in their care, reminding them of God's proximity and provision, which is often through the generosity of others. His expression of gratitude is for financial support, other resources and prayer, to further the spread of the gospel. The generosity of those who give demonstrates unity in both purpose and mission.

Praying for others means more than solely interceding and pleading to God on their behalf. It also involves giving thanks to God for them, a consistent theme in Paul's letters. In his correspondence with the Ephesians, he thanks those who have supported him and for whom he feels particular concern (Ephesians 1:15–16). By doing this, he combines thanksgiving and joy; there is no hierarchical relationship, but rather a deep appreciation for the community. Even when correcting them, Paul encourages them to be better. Gratitude is not measured in banal clichés, but rather a sense of wonder at what God is doing among his people. This is the strength of our joy: it is connected to the promotion of the gospel rather than to our circumstances or the reactions of others to us. Joy in the Lord remains constant, even during challenges. Paul could be joyful not only towards those filled with goodwill and love towards him, but also towards those who preached the gospel out of rivalry and contempt for him. In community, what this speaks to is that our focus should be orientated towards joy and not towards scrutinising the motives of those involved in sharing the gospel. Our prayers then become shaped by thanksgiving that Christ is known.

## 2 Being sent for a purpose

### Philippians 1:1–18

The word ‘apostle’ comes from the Greek *apostolos*, meaning ‘one who is sent out’. The associated Latin expression is *mission*, ‘sending’; and the gospel message of the early church was conveyed by those who were being sent across the world in accordance with Christ’s command to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). There were many different types of apostles with various tasks of ministry, support, encouragement and to live out the mission, often in places hostile to the message of the coming kingdom and the lordship of Jesus Christ. The early Christians were well aware that they were the subject of intense societal suspicion ranging from undertaking strange practices such as the Lord’s Supper all the way up to subverting the state and disloyalty to the emperor. As a result, they experienced oppression, and yet the early church thrived. An important characteristic of Pauline theology is highlighting that God works through adverse circumstances, choosing the foolishness of the cross to redeem a fallen humanity (1:27). As it was then and is now, suffering for the gospel’s sake is a reality for a significant number of Christians throughout the world. In identifying with Christ and with Paul, the Philippians share in their afflictions. God’s name is still being praised despite their circumstances, and Jesus is being glorified, because of their witness to the gospel.

The life-enhancing, freeing gospel of Jesus Christ is the main point; in verses 15–18 Paul explains that even though some may preach the gospel from selfish ambition, it is not our task to judge but to believe in God, who is the subject of the gospel being preached. Therefore, the name of the Lord will be praised regardless. Moreover, our joy is compounded as we rejoice together, thanks to the triumph of Jesus over sin and death. Comparing this joy to current culture understandings of joy, one can see that it is not fleeting or dependent on external circumstances. It is a deep and abiding joy that comes from knowing Christ. The confidence that comes from assurance in Christ cannot then be diminished by affliction, and the purpose for which Paul was sent out will prevail.

### 3 A faith to die and live for

#### **Philippians 1:19–30**

The Christian pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed during World War II for resisting Nazi dictatorship. His final message reflected an understanding that he would inevitably face execution, but his death, because of Christ, was not the final chapter when viewed from the perspective of eternity. As a founding member of the Confessing Church in Germany, which resisted attempts to elevate Nazi ideology over Christian doctrine, Bonhoeffer declared there was more to life than this current existence. His attitude highlighted victory through faith.

At times of great turmoil, the question of how we live for the gospel is particularly acute. The apostle Paul did everything he could to spread and encourage the gospel message. He asserts that his death is a net gain because it allows him to be with Christ, which he considers 'far better' than living (1:21–23). This way of looking at life serves not only as a strategy for Paul to endure the present trials of arrest and prison, but also as a message of hope for the Philippians. Despite the threat from imperial Roman's ability to destroy his body, Paul views his death instead as a glorious moment of reunion with Christ (v. 23). Paul's view turns worldly priorities upside down. Material possessions and activities focused on self-indulgence lose their appeal compared to the hope of being with Christ. Living life in Christ takes on new meaning when rooted in faith rather than being considered from more natural, fear-driven perspectives. Even in prison, Paul did not stop preaching Christ, crucified and risen. Thus, Paul's imprisonment inspired confidence within other Christians to talk about Jesus more openly and optimistically. Either scenario had merit. Even though the possibility of imprisonment and execution was apparent, real life is defined by following the Messiah. Dying would mean being present with Jesus, which would be a bonus for him. If released, he could keep working to start more Jesus-shaped communities, which would be better for others. Dying for Jesus is not the true sacrifice, it's staying alive to serve others. This is what participating in the story of Jesus – to suffer and to love others more than ourselves – truly means.

## 4 Current troubles in the context of future hope

### Philippians 1:19–30

There is a human tendency to think of time as linear, so that our life is focused on the present with only intermittent references to the past or the future. The current trend for mindfulness is to promote awareness in the moment. However, for Paul, the gospel message is concerned not only with current circumstances but those yet to come in the ongoing revelation of the kingdom. In this letter, the future and the present are considered simultaneously; we see his perspective on what's happening now and as it relates to the future. Paul presents the challenge of living out hope in the present while being orientated towards the culmination which will come, all while enduring hardships.

The reality is that if we forget the future dimension of the gospel, we forget the summation of the gospel itself and the hope it contains to ensure the transformation of all things. In this way the Philippians' suffering has Christological significance; they suffer on behalf of Christ (1:29). Paul encourages the Philippians to stand firm together, united in spirit and purpose (v. 27). His words emphasise the body of Christ, the church where believers support and care for one another, prioritise the gospel and bless those who are yet to have a personal relationship with the Messiah. Participating in others' suffering is part of being the body of Christ. Suffering for the sake of Christ is not only a sign of our commitment to him but also a way of participating in his redemptive story. By embracing both the present challenges and the future hope of the gospel, we can live out our faith authentically and courageously, knowing that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven and our ultimate hope is in Christ. By adopting the same mindset, our lives as citizens should be consistent with the good news about the Messiah. Although these Christians in Philippi lived at the epicentre of Roman patriotism, their way of life was to be shaped by another king, Jesus. That might bring persecution, but they should not be afraid, because suffering for being associated with Jesus is a way of living out the story of Jesus himself. This eternal perspective enables their calling to live out their faith with boldness and conviction, even in the face of adversity.

## 5 Revelation, attitude and imitation

### Philippians 2:1–16

The beautiful narrative of Philippians 2 offers us a number of profound insights into the nature of Christ's divinity. Paul makes a series of statements about Christ, his pre-existence and equality with God, his identification with humanity and his atoning act of sacrificial love. In 2:1–4, Paul tells the Philippians to be like-minded and united in purpose (*phronountes*, v. 2). He repeats the word and frames it in the context that they should think of themselves with modesty as Christ did (v. 5), literally translated, 'Have this attitude among yourselves which also in Christ Jesus.' Confusion about understanding this verse arises from the absence of the verb *is* in the second clause ('which also in Christ Jesus'). Did Paul intend for the reader to supply the same verb in this clause that appeared in the first clause ('Have this attitude among yourselves which *you also have* in Christ Jesus')? This is the view of those who adopt the kerygmatic interpretation, focusing on a personal encounter with Jesus. The proclamation of the gospel invites us to respond in faith, turning our lives towards God's redeeming love. According to this, the Philippians should have the attitude among themselves that is required of those who are 'in Christ' – that is, those who believe his death and resurrection. The listeners are urged to 'consider' others better than themselves 'in humility' (v. 3), as Jesus did, making himself of no reputation (vv. 5–7). Just as Christ did not 'consider' equality with God something to be exploited (v. 6) but 'humbled himself' (v. 8), Paul also refers to Christ's obedience (v. 8) when he speaks of the Philippians' obedience (v. 12).

If anything, having a mindset of obedience to God starts with thanksgiving and being grateful. Someone once said, 'I complained that I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.' One day, Christ's disciples started arguing about who would be the greatest in his kingdom. Jesus listened, then picked up a towel and a water basin and began washing their feet (John 13:1–10). When he finished, they were speechless, their hearts were exposed and their attitudes were corrected. 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who... made himself of no reputation' (v. 8). In essence: we serve as Christ does!

## 6 Witnessing to Christ's humility

### Philippians 2:17–30

One of the most profound acts of humility conducted by Jesus was to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13:1–10). Such an extraordinary act of service demonstrated a love that goes beyond the usual parameters of expectations in order to put the needs of others first. The best way to express God's character, therefore, is through Christ's example of selfless sacrifice and obedience. Serving others becomes evidence of a willingness to put aside the innate need to be self-centred rather than God-focused. A heart orientation towards others goes against the human inclination towards selfishness and domination so often played out in society, from competitiveness to ostracising groups due to their race, class or gender. However, it's important to remember that God doesn't expect us to rely solely on our own efforts to do this. His power works within us to become more Christ-like in doing the Father's will. Living like Christ without the power of the Holy Spirit is fraught with difficulty in modern societies, where value is often attached to wealth, glamour, power, prestige and the accepted ways of doing things.

In Philippians 2:12, when Paul tells believers to 'work out their salvation', he is not asking them to work for their salvation on the final day. Instead, he advises them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ while they wait for the final affirmation of their right standing before God on the day of Christ. They should focus on discerning what is best so that they can remain pure and blameless until the day of Christ. Timothy and Epaphroditus serve as faithful examples of the conduct that Paul has explicitly urged the Philippians to embody. Believers are to be united in spirit and live in humility and selflessness. In Timothy, Paul sees a genuine concern for the welfare of others, a willingness to put the needs of others before his own and a deep commitment to the things of Jesus Christ. Likewise, in Epaphroditus, Paul recognises loyalty and the dedication of a servant who is not only a brother in the faith but also a fellow worker and soldier in advancing the gospel. They are the kind of people who are living, breathing examples of the story of Jesus and they are worthy of invitation.

# Guidelines

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- Paul's perspective challenges us to rethink our life, death and priorities in the light of who Jesus is and what he has done. Rather than fearing death, we are encouraged to find hope in Christ's resurrection and live purposefully within a supportive faith community. As you read these verses, reflect on Christ's humility and how we, in turn, can demonstrate this to foster unity and show love. In what practical ways can we follow Christ's example of selflessness today?
- The joy Paul experiences when he sees the gospel advancing is not a superficial happiness that ignores the reality of affliction but a profound recognition of God's power to fulfil his plans, even in the face of human suffering. While believers should recognise and 'mourn' about suffering, as Paul mentions in another letter, they should not grieve as those with no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). This combination of hope and sorrow forms part of the Christian experience. How might you describe Paul's perspective on joy during these times?
- Paul discusses finding contentment in all circumstances, highlighting Christ as the ultimate sustainer over material possessions. How does Paul's emphasis on finding joy in every situation challenge societal norms prioritising material possessions?
- Humility is a significant theme in Philippians. How might we be aware of and avoid notions of false humility in our interactions with one another?
- Paul's letter to the Philippians highlights the need to rely on Christ for strength and sustenance so that we can flourish. What are the fundamental actions required for personal flourishing and spiritual growth? Why is it so challenging in a culture orientated towards consumerism?
- Individuals often seek explanations for suffering. Providing satisfactory answers to this question is challenging. How does Paul's assertion that suffering offers greater opportunity to know Christ align with this search for answers regarding the existence of suffering in the world?



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'I find *Guidelines* so helpful, full of insight and depth. The challenges are also helpful, and looking outside the box of a particular stance is so refreshing.'

'Our thanks for making us think things through.'

'I feel I must write to say how much help, support and encouragement we have felt from the recent contributors. Many thanks to all concerned.'



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