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INTRODUCTION TO THE *J-CURVE* INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDY SERIES

“I’ve believed the gospel. Now what?”

Believing *more* seems like the correct response. But the more you focus on believing, the more you struggle to live out your faith. If this describes you, you are not alone.

Scripture gives us greater guidance than “just believe.” The apostle Paul explains how we live out the gospel in Philippians 3:9-10, when he aspires to:

“⁹ be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”

Luther’s rediscovery of justification by faith—fueled by his reflection on this verse—liberated the church like never before and is rightly celebrated. But we are less enthusiastic about the truth that follows:

“¹⁰— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”

Paul acknowledges something we’d rather gloss over and have largely ignored as a church: Jesus’ life takes a downward path into death before moving upward into resurrection.

If you think of it visually, you can trace out the letter “J.” We at seeJesus call this arc of the gospel “the J-Curve.” The apostle Paul describes the J-Curve as the normal Christian life¹—a reenacting of the death and resurrection of Jesus—but it doesn’t feel normal to most Christians.

The *J-Curve* Interactive Bible Study is a series of six units that search out what it means to faithfully live the kind of dying-resurrection life Paul describes in Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, and Acts.² By exploring these letters together, we catch Paul’s radical vision of living life in the shape of the J-Curve—a vision that lies at the heart of Paul’s definition of what it means to be a Christian.

Living in the *J-Curve* means we don’t have to succumb to our allergy to suffering or equate God’s favor with earthly success. Embracing the J-Curve renews our hope in a dark world, draws us into fellowship with God’s people, and radically re-centers our daily lives on Christ. And it answers our deep and earnest question: “I’ve believed the gospel. Now what?”

¹ Phil. 1:29, 2:5-9, 3:10-11

² The theme is dominant in these Pauline letters but muted somewhat in Romans and Galatians.

Unit 1: United With Christ

Union with Christ—being “in Christ”—doesn’t sound like the solution to a real problem. But a careful study of Philippians 3:1-11 reveals that our problems with legalism and the Flesh are solved by our union with Christ. Justification by faith liberates us from human pride and despair by giving us righteousness as a gift. This lays the groundwork for understanding how the J-Curve builds on justification by faith and makes union with Christ come alive in a way that simply believing the gospel by itself doesn’t.

Unit 2: The Descent of Love

We take a closer look at the patterns and structure of the J-Curve through this study of Philippians 2:1-9, discovering how humility and incarnation shape the downward journey into death. Understanding that our justification is grounded in Jesus’ resurrection, we see that the J-Curve is the shape of both unity and purity in the church. We then explore how the J-Curve looks in Paul’s life and in the lives of his fellow workers and how he calls the Philippians to live it out.

Unit 3: The Wisdom of the Cross

The Corinthian church is familiar with justification by faith, but the gospel sits like a mist over their essentially pagan ways of relating to one another. So Paul doesn’t just preach the gospel to these believers. He embodies it, living out the J-Curve among them as one who is “enslaved by the gospel.” As we study 1 Corinthians, we begin to see how the J-Curve shapes the way a gospel community lives together.

Unit 4: Thorn in the Flesh

In 2 Corinthians—Paul’s “Romans” for the J-Curve—Paul digs deeper into the J-Curve life when he is attacked by the Corinthian church. His pattern of not just believing the gospel but also reenacting it produces a gospel community that reflects the dying-resurrection life of Jesus and leads to Paul’s reconciliation with the church.

Unit 5: Transformed by Hope

We follow Paul in Acts as he journeys to Jerusalem and then Rome, watching how he experiences the dying and rising of Jesus in the midst of beatings, imprisonments, and persecution of all types. His everyday experience of suffering is transformed by the hope he has in Christ, and that transformation impacts the shape of his gospel community. The book of Philemon provides a glimpse into what that community looked like for Paul.

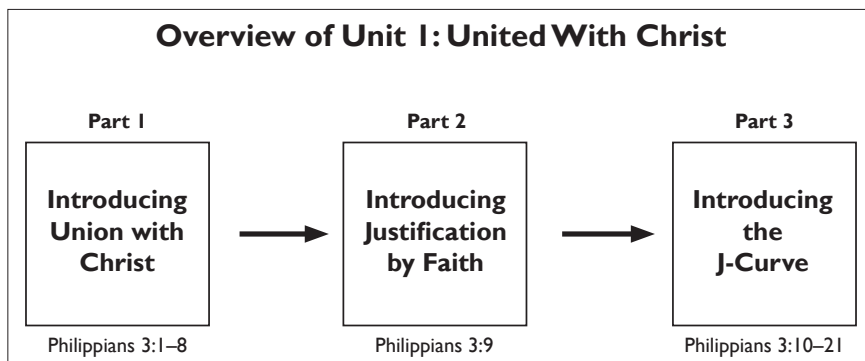
Unit 6: Immersed in Gospel Community

We begin with the Gospels, looking at how Jesus lays the groundwork for a distinctive gospel community and then how Paul carries that out in his Greco-Roman context. This final J-Curve study gives us a vision for this type of gospel-shaped community—balancing the outward forces of mission with the inward forces of community—where Jesus’ death and resurrection is continually reenacted. Spoiler alert: it is a touch of heaven!

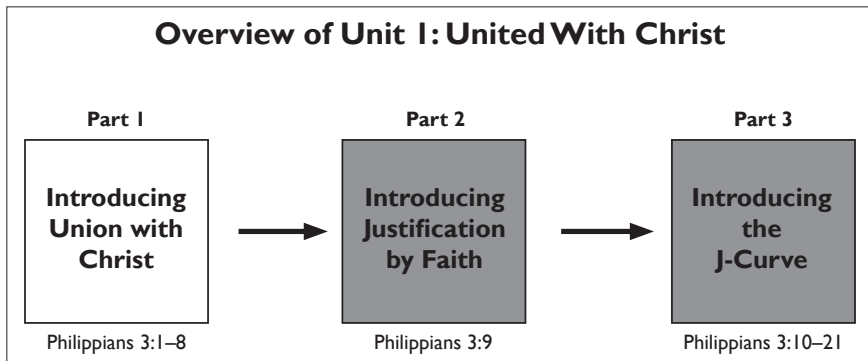
KEY CONCEPTS OF *J-CURVE STUDY,* *UNIT 1: UNITED WITH CHRIST*

The gospel isn't for just the beginning of the Christian life, but the whole life.

1. Our Flesh is allergic to God, the true source of life, and is always seeking alternative sources of life. It wants to be “in” something other than God.
2. Legalism is the Flesh's measuring rod. If I'm not that bad, then following a few rules is all I need.
3. Union with Christ isn't just a theological idea. We are always in union with something, either an idol or God. We naturally want “in.”
4. Union with Christ is the frame for justification by faith. Justification by faith is inseparable from being “in Jesus.”
5. Justification is wholly a work of God received by faith. Even faith is a gift of the Spirit.
6. Justification by faith shapes how we do life. It frees us from both the pursuit of boasting and also the fear of failure and draws us into Christ.
7. The J-Curve describes Jesus' path downward into death and upward into resurrection.
8. The normal Christian life looks like the J-Curve. We are always dying and rising.
9. We don't just believe the gospel; we become like the gospel in our lives. We reenact his dying and rising.
10. The “fellowship of his sufferings . . . and power of his resurrection” (the J-Curve) provides a missing grounding for love.



PART 1: UNION WITH CHRIST



LESSON 1: IN THE FLESH

SECTION 1: The Legalist's Boast

Philippians 3:1-6

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. ² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and *boast*¹ in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.



Historical Background: Judaizers

The people Paul warns about were called Judaizers. They were Jewish Christian missionaries, not approved by the Jerusalem Church, who wanted Gentile Christians to become Jews in practice by being circumcised.² In their view, Gentiles had to keep the law in order to be truly part of the people of God (see Gen. 17). Judaizers said that “Jesus + law obedience = salvation.”³

1. What do you think Paul is referring to when he says these people “mutilate the flesh”?

¹ I've changed the ESV *glory* to *boast* because it is a more literal translation, and *boasting* is a major theme in Paul that gets lost because the Greek work is translated as either *boast* (NIV), *glory* (ESV) or *rejoice*. See Thielman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Philippians*, 168.

² Summary by Dr. Kevin McFadden, personal note to the author.

³ For a full explanation, see Tom Schreiner, *Circumcision* in Hawthorne, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*.



Historical Background: Legalism

- Paul didn't care if someone was circumcised or uncircumcised (Gal. 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:19). He even circumcised Timothy so as to not offend Jewish believers since Timothy's mother was Jewish (Acts 16:3). What Paul was opposed to was circumcision as a requirement for justification or salvation (Gal. 5:2-4).⁴
- 1st century Judaism, like all legalism, was concerned for formal, outward purity that forgot about people.
- In legalism, the outer ritual and performance is all-important as opposed to inward change and deeper issues of the heart.



Entrance to a mikveh filled with water south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.⁵

2. As you look at this historical background, what are some of the patterns of the Judaizers' approach to "goodness"?

⁴ Summary by Dr. Kevin McFadden.

⁵ Photo courtesy of Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com

3. How is reliance on ourselves a very modern solution to our problems?

4. We look back on mikvehs and say “how odd,” but what modern efforts do we make at self-improvement? What do we obsess over?

Summary of Observations on Legalism:

1. Legalism focuses on outward behavior and not the heart.
2. Legalism focuses on appearance, on outward purity instead of inward purity.
3. The legalist doesn't think he is that bad, so he is confident he can change himself.

Definition of Legalism: The law is good; in fact, it gives us a wise path to follow. But because of the Flesh's confident self-righteousness, we believe that we can both please ourselves and God by merely doing the right thing on our own. Then rules or “keeping the law” become a yardstick that show us (as well as God and others) how good we are. In other words, our Flesh corrupts the law. We lose sight of the heart of the law—love for God and neighbor—and put rules ahead of people.

SECTION 2: Paul's Reaction to Boasting

5. What three things does Paul call the Judaizers in verse 2?



Literary Background: Paul's Warning

Each of the three words (dogs, evil, mutilate) begins with the “k” sound, adding to the punch. This is called alliteration. A translation closer to the feel of the Greek (3:2) reads:

Look out for those *dogs!* *kunas*

Look out for *evil workers!* *kakous*

Look out for the *mutilation!* *katatomen*



Historical Background: Religious Terrorists

Paul looked at Judaizers the way we look at terrorists. If Judaizers were not stopped, they would destroy Christianity by making it a Jewish ethnic sect.



Literary Background: Paul's Warning

With each of the three names, Paul subtly calls the Judaizers pagans—the very people they despised.

1st: “Dogs” was a religious term.

2nd: “Evil workers.”

3rd: “The mutilation” is a pun.

SECTION 3: Paul the Apostle's Boast

6. Read 3:3. Who is the “we” in 3:3? How does this reverse what the Judaizers thought?



Theological Background: Circumcision of the Heart

The Old Testament (Deut. 10:16, Jer. 4:4) tells us that Israel needs circumcision of the heart.



Literary Background: “Boast in Christ Jesus”⁶

“Boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” is written in an X-pattern.⁷ Similar letters (A and A’) indicate similar ideas.

A Boasting
B in Christ Jesus
B' and not in the Flesh
A' Putting confidence

7. “Boasting in _____” and “confidence in _____” serve the same purpose. What does boasting or confidence in something do for us?

8. Let’s list what Paul’s Flesh is confident in before he met Jesus.

1.

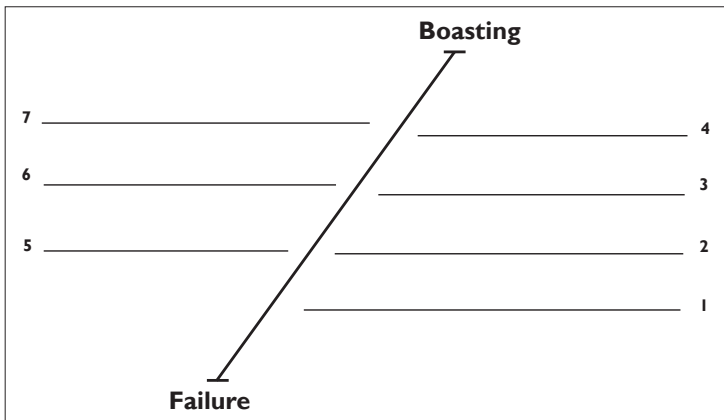
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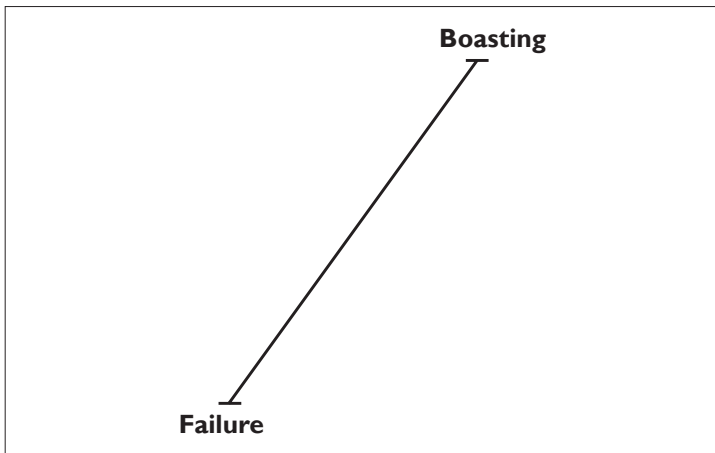
⁶ The Greek word *boast* has a broader meaning than the more negative English word so it is translated as either *boast* (NIV), *glory* (ESV), or rejoice. I’ve used *boast* because it is a major theme in Paul’s writings that can get lost. See Thielman, *Philippians*, 168, and Silva, *Philippians*, 147.

⁷ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 363.

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.



9. Let's construct our own chart similar to the apostle Paul's. Think of a personal boast you've either said or thought. I'll write them down.





Historical Background: Shame-Honor Culture

In a shame-honor culture (which was all of the ancient world) your primary identity is given at birth. So the first four items belonged to Paul as the son of well-born Jewish parents. Paul was upper-class Judaism.

10. How do we see legalism in Paul's list of virtues? What is legalism focused on?

SECTION 4: The Flesh

11. When Paul says "Flesh" in 3:3-4, what do you think he means?

Definition of the Flesh

Paul the apostle uses “the Flesh” in several distinct ways.

12. Why does the Flesh like legalism?

13. Why doesn't legalism work?

14. What is the relationship between legalism and “the Flesh”?

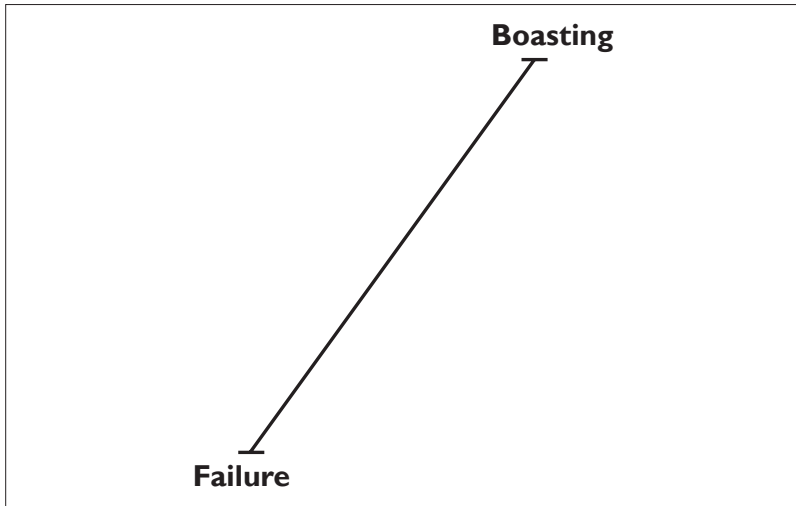
LESSON 1 APPLICATION

Reflecting on Legalism

1. Legalism makes the rule more important than people. Can you think of an example where you've seen legalism, where someone has a personal rule that forgets about people?
2. Can you think of an example in your life where you've had a personal rule that forgets about people?
3. What are forms of legalism in our modern culture—either secular or Christian?
4. Why are we so quick to become legalists?

Reflect on the Failure-Boasting Chart

Construct your own Failure-Boasting Chart based on your personal boasts, either current ones or those that you've had in the past.



Reflect on the Flesh

5. Based on this lesson, create your own personalized definition of the Flesh using the word "me." Share these with the group.

6. Can you think of one area of your life that might be an "alternative source of life"?

