

Philippians

Core Group Study Guide

By the Chi Alpha Staff at UVa

This is a six-week bible study on Philippians. This study is intended for use in core groups, or even as a personal study. By no means will this study be all encompassing, but hopefully, it will be a jumping off point for further understanding of Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi.

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Overview of the Study

Breakdown of Studies:

An Overview of the Study:

Week 1: Intro and Chapter 1:1-11

Week 2: Chapter 1:12-26

Week 3: Chapter 1:27-2:18

Week 4: Chapter 2:19-30

Week 5: Chapter 3:1-4:3

Week 6: Chapter 4:4-23

Objective of the Study:

A Contextual Introduction:

Philippi was located at the eastern end of central Macedonia (currently, a part of the periphery of East Macedonia in Greece). Named after Philip of Macedon, Philippi was an urban political center with a varied socioeconomic demographic. It was here where Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled after Paul's divine vision of the Macedonian man begging him to "come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9).

Upon their arrival in the Roman colony, they went to Macedonia's first house church, hosted by Lydia, worshiper and wealthy cloth merchant. She responded to Paul's message about Christ, as did the rest of her household. Later, a slave girl is delivered from demonic oppression and Paul and his traveling companions are imprisoned. Despite their imprisonment, God has bigger plans and utilizes their imprisonment for the salvation of the jailer and his family.

Although the length of their stay is unknown, the visit (in addition to a few subsequent visits) is long enough to establish a close spiritual friendship. Paul flatteringly writes about them again in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. It is on the basis of this friendship that we find the foundation for Philippians.

There are two major reasons for his writing. The Philippian church is most likely in the midst of persecution at the hands of Roman citizens, allegiant to emperor. They viewed the emperor as "Lord and Savior", whereas believers in Christ could not.¹

In addition, Paul writes because there is internal unrest and conflict within the Church. He was concerned that this could prevent their unification in the face of persecution, and diminish their witness. Paul speaks specifically to this in the epistle.

Ultimately, Paul's main purpose in penning the letter is to draw their attention to the Gospel. He is always guiding and leading believers back to the importance of Christ in all situations. Jesus Christ is the reason why we can face persecution, bear humility in all of our relationships, and rejoice always.

Note: Much of the material used for this study will be influenced by Gordon Fee's commentary entitled Philippians: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series.

¹Fee, Gordon. Philippians: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999.

Questions have also been adapted from “Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians in Six Discussions: Chi Alpha New Orleans 2008” which can be found at www.chialpha.com/files/SixDiscussionsOnPhilippians.pdf

Week One: Philippians 1:1-11

Objective: To introduce Philippians and the introductory remarks of Paul's letter.

Opening Question:

1. How do you think email has changed communication through the years?
2. What kinds of emails do you write? Generally, what are the purposes behind writing emails for you? (This will refer to why letters were written in Biblical times, and the purpose for Paul's writing)

Body of this week's study:

The letter begins with a brief introduction from Paul and Timothy. Since the rest of the letter is clearly Pauline (because of its Christ-centeredness), Timothy was probably his secretary. Immediately, Paul opens with their common tie, "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"(1:2). This relationship was the foundation for their spiritual friendship.

It is clear that Paul is imprisoned and is writing them for a very specific purpose. But before he reveals that, he encourages and lifts them up.

Gordon Fee, theologian and commentator, notes,

'Three matters make up most of our letter: (1) genuine gratitude for the Philippians' partnership with him in the gospel over many years, evidenced most recently by a material gift brought by Epaphroditus; (2) news about his present imprisonment and what he expects to come of it; and (3) an appeal for steadfastness and unity in light of some relational breakdowns, present opposition and the danger of false teaching'(Fee 45)

Text Questions:

Please add or alter any text questions to fit the needs of your group.

1. Paul opens the letter by calling himself a "servant of Christ". The word translated *servants* actually means "slaves" in Greek. Why would Paul have called himself and Timothy slaves to Christ? (Also, don't think of American slavery here- instead the Greek word refers to someone that is subservient to the master. It is not meant to mean an abusive relationship)
2. What does Paul pray for his friends?
3. Why would he pray that?
4. What might this reveal to us about friendship?
5. What does "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" mean? (v. 6)
6. What is Paul's main prayer and concern for them?

Application Questions:

1. As believers, we're called to be servants of Christ. The word in Greek for *servant* means slave. It means having utter dependence on Christ. Do you have utter dependence on Christ? Why or why not?

2. Paul feels so strongly for his friends that he thanks God for them and prays for them. Do you pray for your friends? If so, what do you pray for your friends?
3. If someone were praying for your relationship with God and others, what would they need to pray for?
4. What would it look like for “love to abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight” in your life? (v. 9)

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

Spend some time this week to really ponder about what it would look like for love and the knowledge of God to abound more in your life? What could you do to usher that in? Do you want to see that in your life? Spend some time in prayer and meditation. Perhaps God will speak to you! You can also journal any thoughts, ideas, or prayers that come to your mind. Writing them down will help you to remember this time in the future.

Memory Verses:

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ- to the glory and praise of God”(1:11)

Week Two: Philippians 1:12-26

Objective: We want to explore Paul's deepest desire to see the Gospel advance, despite any suffering or repercussions. This discussion will also talk about the source of Paul's joy (and what ours should be) in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Opening Question: When you think of Jesus, what comes to your mind first?

Body of this Week's Study:

Paul is clearly in prison while writing this epistle. But instead of focusing on his hardships and difficulties, he finds the strength to rejoice because the Gospel is still being declared. Imagine finding the courage to do the thing you fear the most simply because you believe that Christ will help you. That takes supernatural faith! Or does it? What makes Paul different from us? Does he know a different Christ than we do?

Text Questions:

Please write your own text questions (in order to shape them according to the needs of your specific group)!

1. Why does Paul think that it is beneficial for him to be suffering in prison?
2. What are the potential outcomes of Paul's imprisonment? [He could be executed]
3. Why would Paul's "brothers in the Lord" have been encouraged by his imprisonment? (v. 14)
4. How do you think the Philippians felt reading this?
5. Why would Paul choose continued life here rather than dying and being with Christ?

Application Questions:

1. What are some important decisions we make in life?
2. If God used Paul's suffering and imprisonment for good, how might He use your suffering for His glory?
3. How do you react in times of hardship, or when something isn't going the way that you'd like?
4. Paul repeats a few ideas throughout this passage: advancing the Gospel, suffering for Christ, rejoicing in all situations. Which one of these impacts you the most today, and why?

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

Since it's early in the semester, maybe you could have members exchange names and pray for each other during the week. Have them pair up before core group ends to share any prayer requests they might have.

Memory Verses:

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain"- (2:22)

Week Three: Philippians 1:27-2:18

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Objective: To discover what it looks like to follow Jesus in our relationship with Him and with others.

Opening Questions:

1. What are the results of unity and togetherness?
2. What are the results of disunity and selfishness?

Body of this Week's Study:

This is a very powerful passage- despite it's tendency to go in different directions. Take the time to really focus on the whole of the passage. What is Paul trying to relay to the Philippians? What is he focusing on?

The Philippians are in the midst of internal conflict. Paul is asking them to bind together and stand as one unified body in the power of Christ. Together we are stronger. Together we can "shine like the stars" and "hold out the word of life" (2:15-16).

The reader's first response to reading this is probably to focus on the suffering that Paul writes about. As Westerners, we immediately cringe at the thought of suffering. We doubt our ability to do so. So instead we ignore the possibility. Instead we focus on the "good" parts of Christianity. However, it is very important that we don't hear this reluctantly or fear that someday we may be asked to suffer as well.

Paul's emphasis in this passage is to look "not only to your own interests" but to have the same attitude as Christ (v. 4). It's about Him! As Gordon Fee says,

"What is needed is a radical paradigm shift toward Christ-and his apostle- as God's ultimate paradigm for us. Through 'death on the Cross' he not only 'saved us' but modeled for us God's way of dealing with the opposition-loving them to death (83)".

In addition to this, Paul writes about what it looks like to live in community. The Philippians especially needed to hear this, but we do too! We are to live in humility and purity because Christ did.

Text Questions: Please feel free to write your own text questions and add them to these (in order to shape them according to the needs of your specific group)!

1. In Chapter 1:27, Paul asks them to live in a "manner worthy of the gospel of Christ". What do you think that looks like? (you can look at the rest of the passage)
2. Why would he ask them to live like that?
3. Re-read 2:6-11. What sticks out to you?
4. Read 2:12-14. What do you think this means? (*This does not imply that salvation solely rests on our shoulders. It doesn't. It means that it is our choice to respond to Him and to follow the Way of Jesus*)

Application Questions:

1. Paul has clearly pointed out that it is important for the Church to stand as a unified body, humble, and of the same Spirit (following Christ together). We are to do nothing out of our interests but to consider others as better than ourselves. How do you think you do/or don't do this?
2. Is there anything about 2:6-11 that you struggle with or have trouble imagining? Sometimes it's difficult to imagine how Jesus is because it's overwhelming and astonishing.
3. In light of all that Paul has said, what do you think it would be like for you and your friends to shine like stars in your generation?
4. What do you think Paul meant by the drink offering imagery? How is that applicable to us? (v. 17)

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

Re-read this passage in your devotional times this week. Ask God to show you any ways that you could be more generous, more humble, less selfish, etc. Write them down. Then ask Him to help you be more like Jesus. Re-read Phil 2:6-11, and meditate on the verses. Ask God to reveal the ways that Jesus humbled Himself, became obedient to death, so that you can follow Him. And then spend a few minutes rejoicing that Jesus did these things for our salvation! What would have happened if He didn't?

Memory Verse:

"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father."(2:10-11).

Week Four: Philippians 2:19-30

Objective: To fully illustrate what it truly looks like to serve God and people, Paul gives us the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus. Both were willing to suffer for the sake of Christ and serve others to the best of their abilities. The goal of this study is to understand the implications of this for our lives. What would it look like for us to love God and people?

Opening Questions:

1. What do you like about your friends?
2. How do they love and support you?

Body of this Week's Study:

It's easy to skim past Chapter 2:19-2:30 because the details of sending Timothy and Epaphroditus seem insignificant. But that would be a mistake. These seemingly insignificant details tell us a little more about why Paul is writing.

If Paul is sending Epaphroditus, why is it necessary to send Timothy, who is like a son to Paul? And why does Paul talk about coming himself? While Paul has gone into a little detail about the seriousness of the internal and external conflict in Philippi, it is here that we learn that it is important and consequential. The location and details of these commendations signifies that Paul uses both Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of two central themes that were mentioned earlier. Theologian Gordon Fee says, "Timothy models serving the gospel by caring for the needs of others; Epaphroditus models the suffering that accompanies serving the gospel"(114).

Paul speaks of Timothy and Epaphroditus very highly. Why is that? First, he says that Timothy takes a genuine interest in them. He has also served with Paul in the work of the gospel. Serving with Paul could not have been an easy task!

Next, Paul commends Epaphroditus. Why? Because he served Paul's needs, even at his own expense. Despite his deadly illness, he continued to work for the gospel as long as he was needed. He willingly suffered on behalf of the gospel and others. Why would the Philippians need to hear this? And why would we?

Lastly, this passage is of a very personal nature. Paul hints at his own sorrows, but constantly thinks of others. So much so that he is willing to send his closest companions to help others. His main concern is the Church.

Text Questions: *Please feel free to write your own text questions and add them to these (in order to shape them according to the needs of your specific group)!*

1. Why is Paul writing about Timothy and Epaphroditus?
2. What kind of people are they?
3. Why would Paul include this part in his letter?
4. What stands out to you about these men?
5. Why do you think Paul sent them to the Philippians?

Application Questions:

1. What kind of qualities do you think Timothy and Epaphroditus had? What do you think it would have been like to hang out with them?
2. It's obvious that both of these men tried to be selfless and dedicated to the gospel. What would that look like in your life?
3. Despite Paul's hardships, he constantly thinks about others. He's so concerned that he is willing to give up what his most precious and helpful to him at this time, his friends. What would it look like for you to constantly be thinking of others?
4. God clearly had mercy on Epaphroditus in his pain and suffering. In what ways has God had mercy on you lately?

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

Take some time to think of your community this week. Do you pray for your friends? Family? People you don't know? Ask God to give you his heart for people. Ask Him to stretch you in your ministry to others.

Memory Verse:

"Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow up on sorrow" (2:27).

Week Five: Philippians 3:1-4:3

Objective: We want to fully comprehend the context of Paul's letter to the Philippians. We also want to understand why this applies to us. Why is this included in Scripture? Clearly, Paul wants the Philippians (and us) to live a life worthy of Jesus Christ. We want to embrace all that God has planned for us, and the righteousness that Christ has given us through faith.

Opening Questions:

1. If you were to die tomorrow, what do you think you'd be remembered for? What kind of life would people say that you lived?
2. What kind of life do you want to live?

Body of this Week's Study:

A little background on today's study: The Christian movement began among the Jewish people of Palestine. The Jewish people were different from the surrounding Roman world in many ways. Yet, in some ways, they were quite similar. One way they reflected the surrounding culture was through their ethnocentrism. They often called non-Jewish people or Gentiles, "dogs". This was a highly derogatory term.

As the Christian movement began advancing into the Gentile world, the Apostles (all Jewish) had some interesting questions to wrestle through (see Acts 11 & 15). Some Jewish Christians disagreed with the Apostles' decision regarding Gentile converts, and began teaching that Gentiles must first become Jews (signified by circumcision and obedience to Moses' law) before becoming Christians. Some Gentiles also picked up this "false gospel", and began to spread it. Paul deals most extensively with this heretical teaching in his letter to the Galatians.

In this passage, Paul turns the "dogs" epithet back on these deceitful teachers drawing attention to the danger and division and disease they carried. Their gospel was not good news, but another attempt to accomplish right relationship with God apart from faith in the cross and the resurrection of Christ. Paul's language is strong, but he dared not go easy on teaching and teachers that would lead his beloved Philippians to destruction.

Paul's focus is a direct response to their teaching. Paul will put no confidence in the flesh, and calls the Philippians and us to do the same by renouncing all self-initiated attempts toward righteousness for the sake of knowing Christ, which is eternal life (John 17:3).²

So ultimately, Paul opens this particular passage with these harsh statements because he feels like these issues are coming against the essence of Christianity. He concludes with an encouragement to look at what is important, which is that we are Christ's after salvation. He is the one that makes us righteous before the Father, and this comes through faith.

² Taken from *Paul's Epistle to the Philippians in Six Discussions: Chi Alpha New Orleans 2008* written by Matt DiGier

Text Questions: Please feel free to write your own text questions and add them to these (in order to shape them according to the needs of your specific group)!

1. What is righteousness? How can we be righteous? (*Righteousness is not "confidence in the flesh" (v. 5), or anything we can do (v.9). This is why being a "good person" will not get you to heaven*)
2. Is Paul bragging about himself? What is he trying to say?
3. What stands out to you in v. 10?
4. Paul writes about suffering, faith, the power of Christ's resurrection, and other confusing topics. But what is Paul really trying to emphasize? (*He is emphasizing that the Christian life is not just about salvation or what to do/what not to do- it's about knowing Christ. Knowing him in his suffering. Knowing Him in His resurrection. It is not just about heaven and hell, but rather about having a relationship with the person of Christ.*)

Application Questions:

1. In 3:7, Paul talks about the things that he counted as a "profit" (the Greek word here also means *advantage*) and how those things are now a loss in comparison to knowing Christ. If you were really honest, are there things that you count as "profit" that sometimes you rely on more than Christ? (ie intelligence, physical attraction, money, could be anything)
2. Do you feel like you're growing closer to Christ? Is your primary desire to know Him more? Why or why not?
3. If someone were to look at your life, what would they say you were striving for?
4. What are some practical ways that you can get to know Christ better?

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

This passage has a lot in it to meditate and pray about. Take a half hour or more to re-write this chapter. This isn't heretical! Just re-write it in your own words. This will help you to fully understand and internalize what Paul is saying. Pray that God will direct you how to pray for yourself.

Memory Verse:

"But whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (3:7-8).

Week Six: Philippians 4:4-23

Objective: We want to further explore how to allow the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds in every situation. And to look at the role of generosity in the believer's life.

Opening Questions:

1. Would you describe yourself as a generous person?
2. How do you deal with conflict?

Body of this Week's Study:

Paul's intention in writing Philippians was to encourage the Philippians to rejoice in every circumstance, whether that is when conflict arises, hardships come, or when we're stressed or anxious. He tells them over and over again to look towards Christ to give them strength. The culmination of this letter is so encouraging because it teaches us that we serve a God who cares about us, is near to us, and who brings peace.

Text Questions: *Please feel free to write your own text questions and add them to these (in order to shape them according to the needs of your specific group)!*

1. Paul specifically speaks to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, about an argument that they're having. How does he ask them to respond?
2. How does his addressing their argument fit in with the rest of the letter?
3. Despite their unreasonable persecution, Paul calls the Philippian believers to gentleness and prayerful. How does Phil 4:5-6 compare to 1 Peter 2:23?
4. How would prayer, petition, and thanksgiving usher in the peace of God?
5. What does Paul say your internal thought life should look like?
6. Why do you think the Philippians were generous to Paul?

Application Questions:

1. Paul writes the expression, "the Lord is near", in v. 5. Theologian Gordon Fee says,

"On the whole it seems likely that this is primarily intended as the last in the series of eschatological words to this suffering congregation, again reminding them of their sure future despite present difficulties. It thus functions as an encouragement and affirmation. Since the Philippians' present suffering is at the hands of those who proclaim Caesar as Lord, they are reminded that the true Lord is near. Their eschatological vindication is close at hand. At the same time, by using the language of the Psalter [in Psalm 145:18], Paul is encouraging them to pray in the midst of their present distress, because the Lord is near in a very real way to those who call on Him now"(Fee, p. 175).

In light of that, how does that make you feel when thinking about your problems, worries, and future?

2. What would your life look like with more peace in it?
3. What would your community look like with more peace in it?

4. Name some things that are praiseworthy, pure, lovely, and admirable in your life right now.
5. What do Paul's comments about the generosity of the Philippians mean to you?

Creative Implementation for the Week/Spiritual Exercise:

Confession is often overlooked in many Protestant circles. Yet it is commanded in James 5:16. Get in pairs, and confess some ways that you've been anxious, angry, whatever it may be. Pray for forgiveness together. Allow God's peace to sink into your heart.

Memory Verses:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."- Phil 4:4-7