

Opening Prayer  
Philippians 1:1-11  
Week 1

## OPENING

Be sure to hop onto the video call a bit early so group members aren't anxiously, awkwardly waiting. Remember you are the host, so just as if you were welcoming folks into your home, use these first few moments to welcome each participant by name. It means a lot to acknowledge everyone on the call and confirm you can see and hear them.

-if there are new folks joining your group, be sure to introduce them

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot. I like the consistency of praying the same pray to center ourselves each week, but once again, feel free to have someone pray differently to open this week.

***Gracious Lord, your Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. We need that light, not just in our time together today, but in our daily living and in the life of our hurting world. May your Holy Spirit soften our hearts that we might be open to the new things you have to say to us and the hard things you may want to reveal to us. Help us to be gracious with ourselves and one another, leaning on Jesus, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant to save us that we might grow into more faithful followers of you in Christ we pray. Amen.***

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

### Check-in question

Have you ever been in the room with a friend who's on the phone? Have you ever tried to figure out who they were talking to and what they were talking about? You listen to what your friend is saying, trying to piece together the clues you gather from the words you hear. You want to discern what they are talking about. "Why did she say that?" "What did the person on the other end say that made him use those words?" **Describe a time this has happened to you. How did what you thought you heard affect how you thought, felt, acted, etc.?**

We are only hearing one side of the conversation between Paul and the Philippians. In essence, we're opening someone else's mail. So we must keep this in mid as we think through the text and try to piece together what is happening in Philippi.

## **STUDY GUIDE**

This video from [www.bibleproject.com](http://www.bibleproject.com) is a very helpful resource (9 minutes long)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE9qqW1-BkU#action=share>

Literary genres and forms are not simply neutral containers used as convenient ways to package various types of communication. They are social conventions that provide contextual meaning for the smaller units of language and text they enclose.

Reading the letter to the Philippians must take into account that this was an oral missive delivered from one friend to another. Paul had been to Philippi and helped to start the first church in Macedonia. Philippi was a Roman colony filled with all kinds of people including retired Roman soldiers. It was a patriotic colony that required citizens to pledge allegiance to Caesar as Lord (*Kyrios*) and Savior (*Soter*). Christians of course could not do this as their ultimate loyalty belonged to Jesus Christ. As a result, Christians were often persecuted in that area.

It may be helpful to read aloud Acts 16 to begin your time together as this narrative gives some context for the writing of the letter to the Philippians.

Acts 16 (can you locate these cities on the map below)

- Timothy joins Paul and Silas in **Lystra**
- They journeyed through **Phrygia** and **Galatia** prevented by the Holy Spirit to speak in **Asia**
- They came to **Mysia** but the Spirit did not allow them to go into **Bithynia** so they went down to **Troas**
- In **Troas**, Paul received a vision of a man in **Macedonia** asking him to come help them
- Timothy, Paul and Silas sailed from Troas to **Samothrace**, **Neapolis** and landed in **Philippi** – a Roman colony
- Gathered with some Christian women by the river on the Sabbath who were worshipping God.
- Among them was Lydia (seller of purple fabrics) who was baptized along with her entire household.
- Paul and Silas healed a slave-girl and her owner became angry because they had used her for profit. So they had the men thrown into prison
- An earthquake in the prison released Paul, Silas and the other prisoners, but they did not escape and the jailer was converted to become Christian
- The magistrates were afraid because they had imprisoned Paul and Roman citizen without proper legal action, so they asked them to leave the city



## Getting Acquainted<sup>1</sup>

Paul wrote to the members of the Philippian church to thank them for their support and prayers, and to give updates on the welfare of Epaphroditus, Timothy, and himself (matters to which we will return under “Date and Historical Background”).

But Philippians is not just a letter of thanks and updates. Ever the teacher, Paul also writes to encourage their faith and growth.

Philippians is an amazingly practical letter—sort of a “101” on Christian living—but it is also a deeply doctrinal letter. For example, in [Philippians 2:5–11](#), we find some of the clearest and most important teaching in all of Scripture on Christ and his incarnation. And yet the primary purpose of this section of the letter is to show Jesus as a model of humility and selfless service so that the Philippian Christians might be further unified and Christlike. So the doctrinal and practical elements are inseparable and intermingled throughout Philippians.

## Date and Historical Background

Paul had a long history with the Philippian Christians, beginning with the conversion of Lydia’s family, a demon-possessed girl, and the Philippian jailer ([Acts 16:14–40](#)). Paul returned to Philippi at least twice, but mutual care and communication between the

<sup>1</sup>Philippians: A 12-Week Study © 2014 by Ryan Kelly.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/knowning-bible-philippians/#week-1-overview>

apostle and the Philippian church seem to have been regular. He prayed frequently for them with much thankfulness and affection ([Phil. 1:3–11](#)). The Philippians stood with Paul, financially and otherwise, when others did not ([Phil. 1:7; 4:14–16](#)). In concern for Paul’s present imprisonment ([Phil. 1:12–19](#)), they sent one of their best men, Epaphroditus, to bring financial support and to minister to Paul’s needs ([Phil. 2:25](#)).

While imprisoned in Rome, in roughly AD 62, Paul pens this letter we know as Philippians. He writes to thank the members of the Philippian church for their care for him and support of his ministry. He writes to assure them that despite his present imprisonment, the gospel is spreading ([Phil. 1:12–18](#)) and that he is well cared for ([Phil. 4:18](#)). He also relays that Epaphroditus, their messenger, is well after having become ill on his journey to Paul ([Phil. 2:26–30](#)). Epaphroditus is now returning to the Philippians with Paul’s letter. Timothy, another worthy servant and Paul’s “right-hand man,” may be coming in due course ([Phil. 2:19](#))—and Paul himself is eager to do the same, if the Lord permits ([Phil. 1:8, 25–26](#)).

## Outline

1. Greeting and Prayer ([Phil. 1:1–11](#))
2. Encouragement about His Imprisonment ([Phil. 1:12–30](#))
  1. Paul’s imprisonment has meant progress for the gospel ([Phil. 1:12–18](#))
  2. Christ will be magnified in Paul’s life or death ([Phil. 1:19–26](#))
  3. Exhortation to walk worthy of the gospel ([Phil. 1:27–30](#))
2. Exhortation to Humble Service ([Phil. 2:1–30](#))
  1. A call to unity, humility, and service to one another ([Phil. 2:1–4](#))
  2. Christ’s example of humble service ([Phil. 2:5–11](#))
  3. Living as lights in the world ([Phil. 2:12–18](#))
  4. The Faithful Examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus ([Phil. 2:19–30](#))
2. Warning about Distortions of the Gospel ([Phil. 3:1–21](#))
  1. Contrast between false teachers and the true people of God ([Phil. 3:1–3](#))
  2. Contrast between self-righteousness and receiving Christ’s righteousness ([Phil. 3:4–11](#))
  3. Paul’s progress in the pursuit of Christ ([Phil. 3:12–16](#))
  4. Contrast between earthly-mindedness and heavenly-mindedness ([Phil. 3:17–21](#))
2. Concluding Exhortations and Thanksgiving ([Phil. 4:1–23](#))
  1. A call to unity ([Phil. 4:1–3](#))
  2. A call to rejoice, trust, pray, and think rightly ([Phil. 4:4–9](#))
  3. Thanksgiving for the Philippians’ gift; Paul’s contentment in God ([Phil. 4:10–20](#))
  4. Greetings and benediction ([Phil. 4:21–23](#))

## POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(of course feel free to veer from these as the group’s conversation flows)

1. The Greek word behind “partnership” (Phil. 1:5) is sometimes translated “fellowship.” Unfortunately, for many Christians today “fellowship” has connotations of merely getting together for food. So “partnership” is a better word, especially here. Remember, the Philippians prayerfully and financially supported Paul’s missionary work. They shared the gospel and shared in gospel work (see 3 John 6–8 for similar language). Remarkably, they even indirectly shared in Paul’s “imprisonment and . . . defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil. 1:7). **What are some implications of this for you, your church, your giving, etc.?**
2. In Phil. 1:6, Paul assures the Philippians that their spiritual state is proof of God’s “good work” in them. He also insists that if God “began a good work” in them, he “will bring it to completion.” **How might these statements be simultaneously confidence-building and pride-crushing?**
3. Having looked at several of Paul’s prayers, what things do you see Paul emphasizing in his prayers? What *kinds* of things is he praying for? Why? How might Paul’s prayers differ from our prayers?
4. In what ways is our modern situation different from or similar to the Philippians? In what ways can you resonate with Paul or the Philippians? What feels foreign?
  - a. ...Culturally? (In what ways does our culture resemble Paul’s in ways relevant to Philippians?)
  - b. ...Personally? (In what ways do we experience the same issues Paul addresses?)
  - c. ...Redemptively? (What about God, his promises, or his commands haven’t changed?)
5. How does your experience of the gospel affect your life in your current situation? What is truly good about the good news?
6. What are you trying to communicate when you tell someone you “yearn” for them? What nuances does this communicate beyond just telling them you love them? B) Paul says he yearns for the Philippians “with the affection of Christ Jesus”. What does this reveal about Christ’s heart? How is this an explanation for Paul’s confidence God will complete his work in them?
7. If you were in a situation like the Philippians, how would hearing Paul’s positive perspective affect you?

8. Even though you may have only just met some of the folks in your COB, what about their lives cause you to give thanks, rejoice over and have confidence for them? Tell them. What would it take to be able to say about each other, “We are partners in the gospel”?



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[www.bibleproject.com](http://www.bibleproject.com)

## HOW TO READ PHILIPPIANS (AND ANY NEW TESTAMENT LETTER)

### Step One: Find the Structure

The letters are not a jumble of random thoughts; they are carefully structured and cohesive works that follow a flow of ideas from start to finish. Most ancient letters have a **four-part structure: the introduction, opening prayer, body, and closing section**. But even within that broad structure, Paul and other ancient writers created sections in their letters that were distinct but related to one another.

So how do you find the structure? Here are a few tips:

**Start with a video.** The best way to get a head start on finding the literary structure of the letters is to start with a BibleProject video. We've created videos for each of the New Testament letters (and the rest of the Bible) that focus on the structure, main ideas, and key points in the letters—all in an easy visual format.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE9qqW1-BkU#action=share>

- ! **Read it a few times.** The next step is a simple one. Read the letter more than once if you can. Try to read it all in one sitting instead of in bits and pieces (or break it in half for the longer letters). As you read them over and over again, you will begin to see new meanings emerging like a picture developing before your eyes.
- ! **Find the literary breadcrumbs.** To continue finding the structure, pay attention to any changes of topic that mark new sections and ask yourself how each idea relates to what came before and what came after. Look for connecting words (since, therefore, finally, but, etc.) that the writers use to transition from one idea to the next. Through these and other methods, Paul and his co-senders have left “literary breadcrumbs” so readers can follow the main ideas.

[The letter to the Philippians](#) breaks down into the following sections.

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### **Section 1: Opening Prayer 1:1-11**

This section begins with a greeting and ends with a prayer that introduces Paul's main themes.

### **Section 2: Paul's Imprisonment 1:12-26**

Paul picks up the topic of his imprisonment.

### **Section 3: Following Jesus' Example 1:27-2:18**

Paul turns the focus on how the Philippians should live and calls them to follow Jesus' example. The section starts with the transition phrase, "Only let your lives be worthy..."

### **Section 4: Timothy and Epaphroditus 2:19-30**

Paul jumps from Jesus to Timothy and Epaphroditus, highlighting them as examples before moving on to another topic.

### **Section 5: Paul's Example 3:1-4:1**

This section begins with a big transition word, "Finally, my brothers..."

### **Section 6: Challenge to Live after Paul's Example 4:2-9**

Again, Paul starts a new section with a transition phrase ("Therefore, my brothers...") and returns to his theme of how they should live as Christians.

### **Section 7: Closing Thanks 4:10-23**

The final section ends with a classic closing benediction, "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus... The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

## **Step Two: Look for the Literary Devices**

The New Testament letters are ancient works of literature. The techniques or literary devices they use can be really different from what we're used to! Being familiar with these literary devices helps us understand the meaning the author is wanting to communicate.

One literary device in particular stands out when we are trying to understand the literary meanings in Philippians—the chiasm.

### **What is a Chiasm?**

A chiasm is a common literary device in biblical poetry that uses repetition to highlight the writer's main idea, make comparisons, and connect the main idea to other subtopics.

Chiasms have a symmetrical structure that can look like this:

! A  
! B  
▪ C

- D: The center of the chiasm is often a really important idea
- C2
- ! B2
- ! A2

## The Chiasm in Philippians 2

If we look for repetition, we can find a chiasm in [Philippians 2:6-11](#)

### [Philippians 2:6-11](#) (“The Christ Hymn”)

tells the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in a poetic format. Check out how this “Jesus poem” maps onto the structure of a chiasm.

- A) Jesus’ Glory as God.** “Though he was in the form of God, he didn’t consider equality with God something to be grasped.” (2:6)
- B) Jesus’ Service to Others.** “But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (2:7)
- C) Jesus’ Humility.** “Being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form, he humbled himself” (2:7)
- D) Jesus’ Death.** “...by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (2:8) **This is the key idea!**
- C2) Jesus’ Exaltation.** “Therefore God has exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (2:9)
- B2) All Humanity Bows to Jesus.** “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth” (2:10)
- ! **A2) Jesus Gives Glory to God.** “and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” (2:11)

## **How Would I Notice This?**

At this point, you may be asking how you might notice something like a chiasm, especially since they are so unfamiliar to the modern reader. One of the best ways to start is to read along and write out what you think the main idea of each section is. When you notice some repetition in ideas, look back and try to see if the author is relating other ideas into a discernible structure or a chiasm.

## **What Does the Chiasm Show Us?**

At the crux of the chiasm (point “D”), Paul draws the other ideas together around Jesus’ crucifixion. It is the turning point which shows how far Jesus was willing to go to serve his people.

Jesus’ life plotted the path for the return journey that all his followers get to take: give yourself away to be found in God, humble yourself and God will exalt you, die to yourself in order to find true life.

All this was waiting just below the surface of the letter! But there is more.

## **Step Three: Notice the Repetition**

Biblical repetition comes in many forms. It is often simply a repeated word, but it can also be whole quotations from other places in Scripture, repeated design patterns or motifs that recur throughout the Bible, or even repeated settings, images, characters, and events. You can learn more about each of these types of repetition with our How to Read the Bible series.

When you develop eyes to see these repetitions, new layers of meaning will open up throughout the Bible, and Philippians is no exception.

## **Repetition in Philippians**

The chiasm (from step one) and the literary structure of Philippians (from step two) come together on step three. Paul’s main ideas about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are repeated in each section of the letter. It is as if Paul is drawing seeds from the life of Jesus and planting them in the rest of the letter, so that they can bear fruit in the lives of the people as they become more like Jesus.

Let’s take a look.

### **Section 1: Opening Prayer 1:1-11**

*Themes: Humility, joy, hardship, hope beyond suffering, God’s glory.* Like Jesus, Paul’s service to others brought him face to face with humiliation and death, but he is still confident that God will glorify himself in Paul’s suffering.

### **Section 2: Paul’s Imprisonment 1:12-26**

*Themes: Hardship, death, hope beyond suffering, God’s glory.* Even if Paul’s service to the Church ended in his own death, it would be a gain because he could be with Jesus. However, like Jesus, he will continue to live, suffer, and serve in order to be a blessing to others.

### **Section 3: Following Jesus’ Example 1:27-2:18**

*Themes: Hardship, humility, love, service, hope beyond suffering, God's glory.* Paul tells the Philippians that even though they face persecution and danger, their lives as Christians should be consistent with the truth of God in Jesus who gave himself up in love for others. Suffering because of Jesus is a way of living out the Gospel.

#### **Section 4: Timothy and Epaphroditus 2:19-30**

*Themes: Hardship, service, death, love.* Paul points out two fellow believers who are living after Jesus' example. First, he commends Timothy because he puts the needs of God's people before his own. Second, he acknowledges that Epaphroditus left his home, just as Jesus did, to serve Paul in his time of need and nearly lost his life in the process.

#### **Section 5: Paul's example 3:1-4:1**

*Themes: Hardship, humility, hope beyond suffering.* Paul turns next to his own story as an example. He recounts the things about himself that others might regard as an impressive "spiritual resume" and says that he has renounced all of that for the sake of knowing Jesus. In other words, Paul empties himself of his own glory after the pattern of the God who came not to be served but to serve.

#### **Section 6: Challenge to Live after Paul's example 4:2-9**

*Themes: Service, joy, hope beyond suffering.* Here Paul challenges two women leaders to follow Jesus' humble example and become unified. He then goes on to encourage the Philippians to give their fears and troubles in prayer to God, who will guard them in Jesus, the one who has passed into death and back again.

#### **Section 7: Closing Thanks 4:10-23**

*Themes: Joy, service, God's glory.* Paul's imprisonment and hardships haven't meant his ruin; rather, they are the very way God has blessed him (and others through him) and through which he has experienced God's strengthening in any circumstance.

#### **What Does it All Mean?**

Through the use of literary devices, structure, and repetition, Paul is trying to get the people of Philippi to sink deep roots into the reality of what Jesus has done, so that they will be able to live transformed lives. He is trying to compel them to form a community that "shines as stars" in the midst of a darkened world and to be filled with peace and unity as they share the Gospel with the world. This still rings true for us today.

#### **Concluding Thoughts**

The New Testament letters are more than just collections of good verses to be lifted out of context and memorized. Seeing Paul's ideas in their literary context deepens the meaning of what he is saying, connecting them to the deeper reality of what [God](#) accomplished in Jesus. And you can study each letter in this way! With the three steps for reading epistles fresh in your mind, we recommend choosing a letter ([Ephesians](#), [Galatians](#), etc.) to practice for yourself



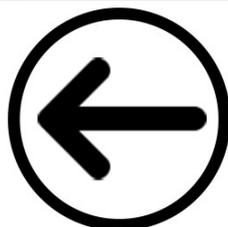
A light bulb should be something that “shines” from the passage — something new or fresh. *What stuck out to you this time through?* Every time we read the Bible, God will be reminding us of things we’ve forgotten and showing us things we haven’t seen before.

And when we read the Bible in a group, he’ll be revealing different things to different people, multiplying the insight and learning. God does not intend for us to see different *meanings*, but to learn the one true multi-dimensional meaning, and then to see some of the limitless implications and applications from that truth.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question the reader would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord. Did these verses raise any questions as you read? You might stumble over a word or verse, or a connection to another part of the Bible, or a particular theological point.

With every question you ask, try and answer your own question before going to others for help. Some of the deepest, most lasting learning we do comes when we press ourselves to search the Bible for an answer to our own question. The answer might be in the verse we’re studying, or in the surrounding chapter or book, or God may bring to mind a verse or verses elsewhere in the Bible. Stop, pray, ask, and do your best. *Then*, turn to others (whether commentaries or other members of your group) for another perspective.



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An arrow indicates a personal application for our lives. Identify and commit to something you sense the Spirit is leading you to do in obedience to this text. Make it specific enough that you can do it this week and make it personal enough that you yourself can do it (and not someone else).

A lot of Bible study, both privately and in a group, falls short of applying the text to our personal lives. One of the great things about studying the Bible in a group is that there's built-in accountability. If you talk out loud with others through steps to take toward greater obedience, you have other people around you to follow up and ask you how those particular things are going.

Arrow (Example): When I do my personal Bible reading, I am going to regularly ask if God might be 1) teaching me something, 2) telling me to stop doing something I am doing, 3) correcting some wrong thinking or behavior, or 4) preparing me to live more effectively for him.