



PRESSING ON

Grow Deeper: A study guide for groups and individuals



study | reflection | action

The world of Philippians

A holistic and robust faith is a faith that remains curious.

– Kat Armas

Much of the New Testament is a collection of letters. We're invited to read other people's mail! Biblical scholar Fred Craddock notes, "The letter to the Philippians was not, of course, written to us; it was to another church in another place in another time... However, this letter is a part of the church's Scripture and to designate a document Scripture is to say that it has a word for us now."

That's the key to unlocking Philippians. We read it with its original audience—the church in Philippi—in mind. We also read it as particular people living today. Like its first readers, we are invited to explore it together. As Pastor Rich Villodas notes, "The Bible isn't a personal letter addressed to me. It's communal in its essence."

As we preach through the book of Philippians this autumn, this guide is an invitation to explore its themes more deeply together.

Check out this video for a great starting overview:

bibleproject.com/explore/video/philippians

PRESSING ON:

ENCOURAGEMENT

FROM

PHILIPPIANS

early autumn 2021

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“Confession in the key of kenosis” by David Wright used with permission of the poet. First published in *The Christian Century* on June 19, 2014.

“St. Paul in Prison,” 1627, by Rembrandt van Rijn. Public domain.

How to Use this Guide

However you want! Seriously, we are not the boss of you.

But here are a few suggestions: First, this study uses the New International Version of Scripture (NIV), so you may wish to read from that same translation as you study. Secondly, this guide is intended to be an invitation into a deeper life with Jesus. Paul reminds us that, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1) so this isn’t just a guide to knowing more information. Each lesson begins with an invitation to a simple spiritual practice as a gentle way to quiet your mind and prepare your heart to be attentive to the loving presence of God. After that, each week is divided into three parts: Study, Reflection, and Action.

As we go deeper with Jesus, we come to points of decision when we can either stay the same or embrace transformation: confessing sin, adopting new habits, reaching out in mission, inviting friendship, offering forgiveness, seeking reconciliation, drawing a boundary, or going deeper.

These types of transformation are what this guide is intended to facilitate. Ready? Here we go!

1

a worthy life

PHILIPPIANS 1

AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *BREATH PRAYER*

The oldest known breath prayer dates from the 6th century and is a simple adaptation of Luke 18:13 : Lord Jesus Christ/Son of God/have mercy on me/a sinner.

A breath prayer is simply talking to God in rhythm with our breathing. It's a way of stilling heart and mind to develop greater attentiveness to God's loving presence. The words for today's prayer come from Paul's greeting in this letter.

Sit comfortably. If you are able, put your feet flat on the floor and leave your hands loosely in your lap.

FOR GROUPS: Close your eyes and allow the leader to guide you in the following prayer:

Breathe in: grace and peace to you

Breathe out: from God the Father

Breathe in: grace and peace to you

Breathe out: from the Lord Jesus Christ

Breathe in: you are God's holy people

Breathe out: holy and dearly loved.

FOR INDIVIDUALS: Read the prayer above in time with your own breathing.

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Philippians 1:1-11 aloud.*

Unlike most modern letters, biblical correspondence often begins with the name of the letter writer.

Q 1: How does Paul refer to himself in the introduction? Why might he refer to himself in this way instead of as a pastor, teacher, scholar, Roman citizen, or church-planter? How do you usually introduce yourself, and why?

Paul wrote Philippians while he was imprisoned far from the church in Philippi, which was located in northern Greece. In biblical times, people in prison weren't usually given food and clothing--they had to rely on the kindness of others to provide it. The Philippian Christians had given Paul a generous gift. Look for evidence of his gratitude throughout this letter.

Q 2: Discernment can be defined as 'wise understanding,' 'thoughtful intuition,' or 'perceptive insight.' What does it mean to 'discern what is best' (v.10)? How might we grow in wise, godly discernment?

Read Philippians 1:12-26 aloud.

Q 3: Paul's prison sentence has served to "advance the Gospel" (v. 12). How did his time behind bars help spread the message of the love of Jesus? Can you think of any more recent examples (real or fictional) of suffering that brought about unexpected goodness?

Read Philippians 1:27-30 aloud.

Paul writes of his suffering as a gift (v. 29). Though he is oppressed and mistreated, his faith is steadfast, and he encourages the church in Philippi to view their suffering as something they endure for Jesus, the one who suffers for and with them.

Q 4: How did Paul suffer “for Jesus”? How might suffering potentially be a way to connect with God for us?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION: *This is where it gets personal. Use the white space following to journal your responses, or take notes as you reflect together as a group.*

Pastor Esau McCaulley writes, “Sometimes you have to worship in the presence of your doubts and disappointments to remind them of who reigns.” Worship is not only an act of the soul, but something we do with our bodies, minds, and wills, too. How might worshiping in the midst of struggle--whether doubt, disappointment, busyness, boredom, or even physical suffering like Paul’s--connect you more deeply to Jesus?

Where is there pain in your life today?

How might that pain become an invitation to a deeper life with God?

Tell God about your doubts or disappointments by writing a prayer in the space below or, if you like, sharing a short prayer with the group.

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION: *Every action section will offer a few possibilities. Not every one will work for every person, so on a given week you may wish to choose one, two, or all.*

1) Write a breath prayer. Connect it to a daily habit you already have (driving to work/school, going to bed at night, walking the dog, etc.) and pray it daily this week.

2) Encourage someone with a letter. Follow in Paul’s footsteps and write a note to someone you dearly love who has blessed you. Offer specific encouragement.

3) Reach out to someone who is suffering. Listen. Empathize. If appropriate, offer a meal or another tangible act of love and service.

2

go down to go up

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *LECTIO DIVINA*

FOR GROUPS: Designate three different readers. Have one read Philippians 2:5-11, while the group sits quietly, each person listening for a word or phrase that the Holy Spirit illuminates (helps stand out) for them. Then take a moment to share your reflections. Pause, then have a second person read and repeat the exercise. Then do it a final time with a third reader.

FOR INDIVIDUALS: Read the passage aloud once, listening for a word or phrase the Holy Spirit illuminates. Take a moment and meditate on that word or phrase before the Lord. Then repeat the exercise twice more.

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Philippians 2:1-4 aloud.*

In *The Way Up is Down*, Marlena Graves writes, “There’s always surrender to humiliation and crucifixion, an emptying, before the glory. There’s no way around it... Emptiness comes before fullness. We have to empty ourselves of any-

thing that crowds out the life or grace of God in our lives.”

Q1: How would you describe humility? How does being connected deeply to Jesus (v.2) help us embrace humility?

Read Philippians 2:5-11 aloud.

These verses is known as the “Christ hymn,” one of the oldest poems in the New Testament. This is one of the earliest faith statements we have about who Jesus is and what he did for us, and its emphasis on humility would have contrasted starkly with Nero--the most well-known (and bloodthirsty) ruler of the day.

Q2: When have you seen someone in a position of power (in real life or fiction) use it for evil? For good? How does Jesus turn the idea of worldly power on its head?

Q3: When have you seen an example of humility in someone else that has drawn you closer to the love of God?

In his book *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund quotes Matt. 11:29, “In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who he is...his surprising claim is that he is ‘gentle and lowly in heart.’ For all his resplendent glory and dazzling holiness... no one in human history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ.”

Q4: Jesus humbles himself, and then God exalts him (v.9-11). Jesus is not a doormat, but a willing servant of God,

trusting that God will faithfully care for him. In what ways do we see Paul trusting God? How might you follow Jesus's and Paul's example?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION: *This is where it gets personal. Use the white space following to journal your responses, or take notes as you reflect together as a group.*

In *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk*, Eugene Cho writes, "Jesus did not only call us to be saved; He called us to follow Him--and He goes to some uncomfortable destinations." Has Jesus ever called you to do something uncomfortable? What was it?

What comes to mind when you hear the word humility? How does Jesus's humility change your view of him? In what ways does accepting--or practicing--our humility unite us with Christ?

We live in a power-hungry world. Whether it's money or influence, political control or social clout, it is easy to see those with influence as more important than those with-

out it. Where (in Scripture, real life, fiction, etc.) do you see an example of worldly power being turned upside down? What can the life of Jesus teach us about true power?

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION: *Every action section will offer a few possibilities. Not every one will work for every person, so on a given week you may wish to choose one, two, or all.*

1) Apologize. Think of an area in your life where you have wronged someone. Go to the person and apologize humbly, fully, and freely (none of this "I'm sorry if you felt bad..." nonsense). A true apology takes responsibility, names the offense, and offers to make it right. Ask for forgiveness and give the person time and space to process your apology.

2) Serve quietly. Find an opportunity to serve this week. PCOM offers many mission opportunities, or you could look around your home, school, or neighborhood for someone in need to whom you could offer a helping hand.

3) Give away your power this week. If you usually speak, listen. If you are given a platform (called on in class, given the floor at a meeting, have lots of social media followers, lead your small group, make the decisions for your family, etc.) find an opportunity to use it to empower another.

3

grumbling wounds

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-30

AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *REJOICING*

FOR GROUPS: Often rejoicing comes through the spiritual gift of play. Give everyone a sheet of paper and a moment to make a paper airplane. (Instructions can be found here: tinyurl.com/58e3frjs). Blunt their tips - we don't want someone losing an eyeball! - and sail them around the room. See whose goes the farthest, whose does the most loops, whose crashes right away, etc.

Sit back down and talk for a moment about how you felt while launching your airplanes.

FOR INDIVIDUALS: Take a sheet of paper and make a paper airplane. Write a note on it ("This is for you to have some fun!" or something similar) and leave it somewhere whimsical today, for someone else to discover.

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Philippians 2:12-18 aloud.*

Q1: Paul writes 'work out your salvation with fear and trembling' (v. 12), reminding us to take God seriously for the sake of our neighbors and our lives. Yet Paul also writes that God is at work in us (v. 13). Whose responsibility is our faith--God's or ours (or both)?

In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis wrote, "Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others." Complaining, venting, and grumbling are not neutral--they can wound us and others. (And they are distinct from healthy critique, which is valuable for growth, in that they are not productive, helpful, or directed to a purposeful end for positive change.)

Q2: How might 'holding firmly to the word of life' (v.16) be part of the antidote to grumbling? How can grumbling be a barrier to healthy relationships with God? With others?

Read Philippians 2:19-30 aloud.

Paul describes Epaphroditus as a "brother, co-worker, and fellow soldier" (v. 25). Pastor Jackson and Daryl's mentor, Chuck Miller, made much of the importance of this order, teaching that we must know each other as close friends/family before working together or standing shoulder to shoulder on the front lines.

Q3: What is the impact of deep, trusting relationships within the community of faith? How did Paul build these relationships? How might we build them today?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION: *This is where it gets personal. Use the white space following to journal your responses, or take notes as you reflect together as a group.*

What do you complain about most often? How might you alter this habit?

Do you have an Epaphroditus in your life--someone who stands with you as a brother/sister, who works alongside you for the Gospel, and who stands with you on the front lines? If so, who?

If not, who do you admire and respect in their faith, and how might you invite this person into a deeper relationship with you?

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION: *Every action section will offer a few possibilities. Not every one will work for every person, so on a given week you may wish to choose one, two, or all.*

1) Create a non-grumbling reminder. Put a loose string around your wrist, a note on your phone, or a pen and paper in your pocket. Every time you grumble today, add a knot to the string, an * on your phone note, or a hash mark on your paper. Do the exercise again tomorrow, and see if you can grumble a little bit less. It's hard to change a habit!

2) Invite an Epaphroditus into your life. Paul and Epaphroditus were peers who encouraged one another in the faith. Think of a peer you admire for their faith and invite them to meet to get to know each other.

3) Memorize Philippians 2:12-13. For a little more fun, challenge a friend and do it together!

4

press on

PHILIPPIANS 3

AN INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: *MEDITATION*

FOR GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS: Read Philippians 3:10-11 aloud three times. Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight a word or phrase in your mind. Meditate (chew) on that word or phrase for the next five minutes (set a timer if you like). Turn it over and over in your mind, soaking in the words and letting them settle into your heart and soul.

If other thoughts intrude on your meditation, it's okay! This is very common. Notice the thoughts, let them pass, and return to the Scripture once again in your mind.

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Philippians 3:1-6 aloud.*

Paul gives all his qualifications for writing this letter, going toe to toe with the other religious experts of his day--but then he takes an unexpected turn.

Read Philippians 3:7-14 aloud.

Monya Stubbs writes, "The knowledge Paul speaks of here is not merely intellectual but also experiential. This is, knowing the power of his resurrection actually means experiencing this power and recognizing that it is at work in one's experience with others. The same is true about knowing Christ's sufferings."

Q1: Describe Christ's sufferings. Paul speaks first about the power of Christ's resurrection and *then* about Christ's sufferings, beginning with the joy before returning to the pain. Why might he choose to write about them in this order?

Q2: Where else do we see this type of imagery--suffering and resurrection, pain and exaltation, death and life--in the world? How are we called to share in *both*?

Read Philippians 3:15-21 aloud.

Q3: In Paul's day, having Roman citizenship allowed you certain rights and privileges. Citizenship was a *very* big deal. We see similar rights play out today with American citizenship. What does it mean to have 'citizenship in heaven'? How might that change how we live now?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION: *This is where it gets personal. Use the white space following to journal your responses, or take notes as you reflect together as a group.*

Paul writes that he practices “forgetting what is behind” and “straining toward” what is ahead (v. 13): the prize for which God called him heavenward. What in Paul’s past might hold him back if he let it? (You may wish to read Acts 9:1-19).

What in your past might be holding you back? How might you address that past pain, sin, trauma, or difficulty so you might be more free to look forward to what God has in store?

How might you keep your eyes on someone living faithfully this week (v.17)? Who might have their eyes on you?

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION: *Every action section will offer a few possibilities. Not every one will work for every person, so on a given week you may wish to choose one, two, or all.*

1) Make a priorities list. Write down everything you do in a week (your priorities of time) or everything you spend money on in a year (your priorities of money). What does your list tell you about yourself? Which things are you proud of, and which make you feel embarrassed, worried, or ashamed? How might you want to change your list? How does it connect with Paul’s words about considering “everything” loss when compared with knowing Jesus (v. 7-8)? If you’re feeling bold, show the list to a friend.

2) Confess what’s holding you back and make a plan to address it. Sin hinders our walk with God, and secret sin can be very powerful. If it is a personal sin, commit to journaling honestly about it this week. If you’re ready, confess it to a pastor, youth group leader, small group leader, or trusted friend. Sins done against us can also cause great suffering and hold us back. If you are struggling with the fallout of this type of sin, journal about its effects. If you’re ready, make a plan to speak with a trusted adult, counselor, therapist, or pastor this week.

3) Memorize Philippians 3:7-11. You may wish to challenge a friend and see who can learn it first!

5

gentle nearness

PHILIPPIANS 4

INVITATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: GENTLENESS

FOR GROUPS: Each person is invited to take a turn sharing 2-3 sentences about a smallish difficulty (a tight deadline, a mouse in the attic, a lost package, an upcoming exam, etc.) in his/her life. The other members of the group will listen well, and then offer gentle empathy (*not* suggestions or solutions).

Here are a few examples:

“That sounds really difficult/painful/hard/sad/confusing.”

“I’m so sorry you’re going through that.”

“Thank you for being brave and sharing your struggle.”

“I hear you. I’m here with you.”

FOR INDIVIDUALS: Take a moment and write 2-3 sentences below about something difficult in your life. Then speak gently to yourself about that hard thing, offering the empathy of Jesus instead of your own inner voice (which can sometimes be harsh or overly critical).

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AN INVITATION TO STUDY: *Read Philippians 4:1-9 aloud.*

Deal with the faults of others as gently as you do with your own. --Chinese proverb

Q1: Paul ties his call for us to rejoice and be gentle with his assertion that ‘the Lord is near’ (v. 5). How are rejoicing and practicing gentleness (and practicing it so well it is ‘evident to all’) connected to knowing and understanding the presence of God?

Q2: Between v.4 and v.9 Paul calls us to undertake six different actions. Can you list them all? Which one is easiest for you, and which most difficult? Why?

Read Philippians 4:10-23 aloud.

Q3: “I can do all things” (v. 13) is often quoted out of context. Here it is linked to contentment--experiencing peace no matter what external circumstances we face. How might going deeper with Jesus transform our discontent?

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AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION:

Do you struggle more with rejoicing (you tend to grumble), gentleness (you're more of a hammer than a feather), or anxiety (worry follows you almost everywhere)? Give an example.

How might the spiritual practices Paul describes in v.6 (prayer, petition, thanksgiving) help you invite Jesus into this struggle with you?

Paul ends Philippians by reminding this early church that God would meet all their needs according to "the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus" (v. 19). Paul writes this from a grimy prison to a church that will soon face physical persecution because of their faith. What does it mean for God to meet all their needs under these circumstances? What would it mean for him to meet yours today?

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AN INVITATION TO ACTION:

1) Practice gentleness. Identify an area in your life where you can lead with more gentleness, whether with yourself (gentle self-talk when you make a mistake) or with others (gentleness in parenting, at the office, with a friend, etc.).

2) Memorize the poem 'Confessions in the key of kenosis' from the inside back cover of this guide.

Kenosis means "self-emptying," echoing Paul's words in Philippians 2:5-8 and here in chapter 4 as well.

3) Read more about Philippians, God's love, or Paul's ministry. A few suggestions can be found in the list below.

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Confessions in the key of kenosis

by David Wright

—after *Philippians 4*

I am the one who has not
rejoiced, always, and again
I will say, is not rejoicing.
Hardly ever my gentleness
is known, even to me, and not,
certainly, to my children. Strangers
report to have seen it on Tuesday
in the library. I do not confirm
this sighting.

But I have catalogued
my every worry about everything,
my requests made known in the sharp,
carping voice on my blog. By supplication
and prayer I claim to have been
deserted. I say it again, deserted, justly.

And still, some Spirit
stays near, alert for the stingiest rejoicing, key
ready in his unclenched hand. Unlock, Heart-Guard,
my chest's dark vessel. Empty me of treasured
loss. And again, I say, make it emptier, until,
for rejoicing, a space larger enough to echo appears.



St. Paul in Prison by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1627, public domain

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