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BIBLE
STUDIES

*Living for
What Really
Matters*

7 Weeks in the Book of *Philippians*

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Teresa's Bible studies are some of the best on the market. Not only has she found a way to teach biblical truth with profound wisdom, but she does so in such a winsome and relatable way. This resource is a treasure!

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Teresa, my pink-haired theologian, I want to hug you for writing these studies. You have shared practical, personal, and challenging ways to make the Bible come alive. When a smart woman chases after the heart of God, we all win.

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With a relatable voice, Teresa makes studying the Bible approachable for women at any stage of faith. The Get Wisdom Bible Studies are a 360-degree look at God's Word with historical contexts, word studies, hands-on application, and commentary for each day's devotion. The studies are timely with varied messages of practicing contentment, trusting God in hard times, and leading the next generation. Teresa is serious about knowing God and how His character changes His people—the reader is not only encouraged to learn but to *live* the truths in these Bible studies.

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GREG HOLDER, lead pastor at The Crossing; author of *The Genius of One* and *Never Settle*



GET WISDOM BIBLE STUDIES

Living for What Really Matters

7 Weeks in the Book of *Philippians*

NavPress 

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with Tyndale House Publishers



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Living for What Really Matters: 7 Weeks in the Book of Philippians

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For all women who are willing to live differently.

*Let's step into authenticity and community,
while lavishing love on others . . . because we're
all messy and yet Christ loves us anyway.*

Let's Connect



*Take a few moments to be replenished . . .
so that you can pour into others.*



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I can't wait to discover all God is doing to help you pursue a life that really matters through this study in Philippians. I'd love to see and read all about it! Post using the hashtag #livingforwhatreallymatters on Instagram, Twitter, and/or Facebook so we can encourage one another as we go through this study.

Get to know Teresa



Teresa Swanstrom Anderson is a blogger, author, speaker, and Bible study teacher. Teresa grew up in Seattle, but spent her middle school years in Guatemala and has a deep love for people in developing countries. Now living in Denver, Colorado, with her husband and six children, she spends her days wiping off sticky counters, Instagramming, and blogging at teresaswanstromanderson.com. She is the author of *Beautifully Interrupted* and has published several Bible studies on her blog. The Get Wisdom Bible Studies are her first traditionally published studies, taking her passion for studying the Bible and helping women to a broader audience.



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Introduction

Never walk away from Wisdom—she guards your life;

love her—she keeps her eye on you.

Above all and before all, do this: Get Wisdom!

Write this at the top of your list: Get Understanding!

Throw your arms around her—believe me, you won't regret it;

never let her go—she'll make your life glorious.

She'll garland your life with grace,

she'll festoon your days with beauty.

PROVERBS 4:6-9, MSG

As a society, we not only like instant gratification—we expect it. We have on-demand movies, Netflix, and Hulu. When our favorite artist releases a new album, we download it onto our phones. If we want a new book, we can get it on our Kindle or listen to it on Audible with a single click. Even two-day shipping seems too slow for us sometimes, doesn't it?

But here's the thing: Growing in our relationship with Christ isn't necessarily quick. There is no instant download to encountering God. We can't pull up into the Starbucks drive-through and leave minutes later with a full grasp of the Bible and what it says about God and means for our lives.

So if you want a bullet-points-only, CliffsNotes experience of the Bible, this study may not be for you. But don't let that freak you out! I get that life is busy, and I promise—we *can* engage deeply with God through His Word in the midst of everything we're doing without being overwhelmed.

If you are a woman whose life isn't perfect, who struggles balancing all aspects of life and wearing all the hats—but you have a genuine desire to grow in your relationship with Jesus in intentional ways that don't require hours a day—then welcome! I'm hopping up onto my chair and throwing confetti around because, my dear friend, you're exactly where you're supposed to be. Together we're going to see the pages of the Bible come alive—and see the God of the Bible become more a part of our everyday experience as a result.

WHY WE STUDY THE BIBLE

The last time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after His resurrection, mere moments before His ascension, something happened that is crucial for us to remember as we approach the Bible together. Luke 24:44-45 says, “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (NRSV).

We should be encouraged: Jesus opened their minds to understand that everything written about Him in Scripture must be fulfilled—but I am certain this isn't the only time Jesus has given individuals unique understanding.

He may even give it to you.

But here's the thing: These men had heard Scripture all their lives. They were ordinary working-class men without higher education. Not one of them had gone to school to become a rabbi, and they did not own a scroll or Bible. Yet because Scripture was read every time these men went to worship and biblical stories were retold throughout their lives, this knowledge was deep within the recesses of their minds and hearts. From childhood, these disciples heard God's Word.

We can know something, however, without understanding it. And that's where the disciples were operating from.

Jesus decided to use this moment before His ascension to turn

the spigot, and all their previous knowledge, the buildup of years of knowing God's Word, poured out. Except now, with Jesus' hand on that faucet, everything they had learned and heard through the years suddenly made sense to them.

With the help of Jesus, knowledge was finally tied together with comprehension, and the disciples had a major aha moment.

Just like the disciples, we won't have aha moments every time we open the Bible, worship, or pray. We will have days or even weeks when we don't "feel" any big revelations or hear whispered promptings from the Lord.

Do you feel like you're reading the Bible wrong or even wasting your time without having those heartfelt or aha moments? If you're like me, you want those heart moments all the time. That's when we feel especially close to Jesus. But here's the thing . . . it's not about us. Reading the Bible is not about having God give us a warm fuzzy feeling. It's not to show us how to act and react; neither is it about Him speaking to us. Spending time in the Word is about learning who God is. It's about growing in knowledge of the Creator of the universe and our Lord and Savior. Period.

When I realized a few years ago that the Word of God is not about me but about Him, I was rocked. I realized every verse within every page is written with the intent of us learning more about God's character and love.

*Every story, every illustration, and every law
loops back around to teach us who He is.*

The Bible obviously shares how we should live and who we should be as lovers of the Lord, but it does so in relation to who God is and how He views us. That's why, whether you've loved Christ for five minutes or five decades, I'm just thrilled to be walking through this study of God's Word with you. Together we get to learn more about who He is! As we continue spending time with Him both in the

Word and in prayer, we'll be more prepared to experience Him when He opens our minds like He did for the disciples.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

The Bible

When I was young, I loved collecting. Specifically, I collected bottle caps and napkins. It's okay, you can laugh—it's totally weird. I had boxes of party napkins. I just loved that they were all different, like little pieces of art. Looking back, it kind of makes sense—I love entertaining and setting a pretty table. I still collect those fun napkins so I'm always ready when someone comes over, but I've also begun to collect something else: Bibles.

Why Bibles? Well, the two-hundred-year-old ones passed down from my grandfather are admittedly pieces of art, but I also have shelves of current versions. Still scratching your head as to why I'd have more than one? Well, let me tell you: because different versions say things in different ways.

A great way of understanding Scripture is consulting various translations. Though these Bibles may be worded differently, they don't ultimately differ in meaning and intent, because they all come from the Greek and Hebrew languages the Bible was originally written in.

Some translations are more literal in interpretation than others, however. For example, both *The Message* (MSG) and The Voice translation (VOICE) capture the tone and essence of the text, while the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), English Standard Version (ESV), and Amplified Bible (AMP) translations are known to be more literal, emphasizing word-for-word accuracy, literary excellence, and depth of meaning. In other words, versions like *The Message* should be looked at as a reading Bible (almost like a commentary that illuminates the text), rather than as a literal Bible, which is better for deep study.

Don't feel like you need to be a crazy Bible-lady like me, with

shelves full of varying translations. The great thing about the internet is you can simply find different versions online. I encourage you to download the Bible Gateway or YouVersion app on your phone or head to their sites on your laptop. Try out a few different versions, and see which ones resonate with you best. If you have a favorite Bible already, google what the Bible you're using is translated for. Is it written for tone and intended meaning? Or is it translated for literal, word-for-word interpretation? Is it a reading Bible or a studying Bible?

In many weeks of this study, we'll explore a reading version of the passage, such as *The Message*, *The Voice*, or *The Passion Translation*, which will help us grasp the thematic picture in more accessible language. As we break apart each passage and dive in deeper, we will use the literal translations, so make sure you have one at the ready. I'll include the text from *The Message*, but in most cases, you will need to reference your own Bible or the Bible app on your phone for the rest. Make sense? Great!

Commentaries and Resources

If we want to be bold women who love God deeply, we must be women of Scripture. We must love the Bible in a way that surpasses others' opinion and research. To become spiritually literate, we must become a student of the Word. Commentaries and books about the Bible are incredibly helpful, but we need to make sure we're not spending more time in books *about* the Bible than in the *actual* Bible.

To be clear, I'm not saying we shouldn't refer to sermons and use commentaries. It would be foolish not to take advantage of the wisdom of others whom we have deep respect for. God has most certainly given the gift of discernment in regards to unraveling the Scripture to unique individuals.

I often study with a commentary or two nearby (in fact, I currently have three opened here on my desk),¹ but through the years, I've learned how important it is to make my own interpretation and

have my own thoughts about a Scripture passage (even if it's mostly questions) before considering someone else's thoughts and interpretation. I need to make sure my first Guide is God, rather than humans.

The first thing I'd like us to do is turn to a resource that can help us wrestle with what we're actually reading in the Bible. As we sort through God's Word, we need to be curious about the meanings beyond simply our initial understanding. That's why, in addition to adding the Bible Gateway or YouVersion app onto your phone, I'd also like you to download the Blue Letter Bible (BLB). This is really important because we're going to reference it All. The. Time.

All of these apps I'm recommending are free, but if you want to download only one, choose the BLB because it has Bible translation options in addition to lots of extra resources. We'll be using this app every day in this study because it allows us to easily dig into the languages of the Bible (the Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages in which the Old Testament was written, and Greek, the New Testament's language).

If your eyes are glazing over and you're beginning to rethink wanting to do our study because "Whaaat? Dissecting Greek and Hebrew sounds hard / boring / not for me"—I get it. But this is something you can do! And digging into the Bible on this level is how we learn to study for ourselves and not have a faith that is spoon-fed to us. We want to make sure we are learning God's truth, right? Not just someone else's thoughts!

The BLB will rock your world if you haven't used it before. It totally changed the way I study. I'll show you really quickly how it can do the same for you. First, let's open the app and click on the search icon at the top. Let's look up something random like Psalm 23. (By the way, depending on whether you're in the app or on the website, you may want to choose a different Bible translation that better aligns with the wording we're discussing in the study—the BLB has a few different options.) Read verse 1 and see what questions come to mind. *Hmmm . . . what does it mean, I shall not want? Like, I'll literally never want for anything if the Lord is my Shepherd?*

Now this is the fun part. We can figure out what these words mean in the original language so we can better comprehend what God wants us to understand! To get there, tap the number by verse 1. On the screen that pops up, tap on *Interlinear** (we'll be using this function a lot!). On the next screen, scroll down to the phrase or word that you're wanting to dig into—in this case, *I shall not want*. You'll see that in the Hebrew the word is חָצַר or *chacer*. What does that word mean? Go ahead and click on it to find out.

On the page that pops up, you'll find all sorts of information about this word: how to say it, what part of speech it is, what its synonyms are. My favorite sections on this page are *Strong's Definitions* and the *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*.

Now, let's say that learning more about the word and its meaning didn't clear up our question. We've started to dig in ourselves and not simply accept someone else's explanation of a biblical passage—but since things are still a little unclear, let's head to the commentaries.

Navigate back to Psalm 23 and click on verse 1 again. This time, click on the *Text Commentaries* option. Some of my favorites in the app are by Matthew Henry and C. H. Spurgeon, but look through all of them to find which ones are most helpful to you. For the purposes of our exploration, let's tap on Spurgeon's Psalm 23 commentary. Here's my takeaway from what he wrote: "I shall not want" means I may not possess all that I wish for, but I am given a spirit of contentment. After all, does God not feed the ravens and cause the lilies to grow? I know that His grace will be sufficient for me.

Other places where you can find cross-references, commentaries, and lexicons online are Bible Hub (biblehub.com) and Bible Study Tools (biblestudytools.com). So many discoveries and insights are just a click away! When you start researching word, context, and commentaries in your study of the Bible, that is often the beginning of more questions and jumping down bunny trails of more questions

* On iPhones, this is called *Interlinear/Concordance*; to get to this function on the website, click on *Tools* next to the verse first.

and research. But you know what? The point of spending time in the Bible isn't to check off a task and move on with our day. Second Peter 3:18 says, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity."

Spending time in the Word and with the Lord is about gaining wisdom and knowledge. So if you decide to bounce around even more than I do within these pages and go down bunny trails that I have yet to discover, do it! You can spend fifteen minutes on a passage of Scripture or fifteen days, months, or years. This is all for you and your relationship with Him!

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Who + How

There are several ways you can engage in this study. Here are some tips for each context:

1. *Individually*: If you're doing this on your own, that's great! Write in the margins, highlight sections where God seems to want to get your attention, star things, put big question marks in areas you'd like to dig into further. Get this book messy! This study is a conversation between you and the Lord, so freewrite throughout as you really dig into all the beautiful things He wants to chat with you about!
2. *One-on-One*: We grow most in community, so find a friend who would like to do the study with you! Perhaps you'll meet together every week over coffee or lunch. Or maybe you'll meet over the phone or virtually.
3. *In-Person Group*: If you are doing this study in a group setting, such as a church Bible study or home group, still strive to be 100 percent honest and authentic in your answers. Often,

when we're with other women, we're afraid that they might judge our struggles, anger, pain, or even questions we have for or about God. But when we hide our true selves, we won't see the spiritual, emotional, and relational growth that can come out of time with other people who love Jesus. Of course, if the conversation dives into particular sections or questions that you don't feel ready to share publicly, give yourself permission to not answer. But if the group feels safe and supportive, I encourage you to bring all of yourself—including your messiness. And remember—even when you're in a group, make sure to invest in your daily, personal study! Coming to the group time after careful engagement with the Scripture will help everyone flourish.

For more specific directions on how to use this study as a group, head to GetWisdomBibleStudies.com to download the PDF guide. This guide will map out how to use this resource in an eight-week study and how to focus on questions and themes most beneficial for group discussion, as well as how to create and facilitate a healthy group.

4. *Virtual Group*: If you're not plugged into a group in your local context, why not start your own virtual group via Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, or another video-conference website and app? Or perhaps your friends are super busy and spread across the state or country (or world!), so finding an actual day and time to meet proves difficult. If this is the case, you can start your own Facebook group, decide who will facilitate, and start chatting about what you're learning each day or each week. You and your friends can simply post whenever works best for everyone's individual schedules! Sounds fun, right?

Each day of this study can take you only twenty to thirty minutes, but if you'd like to dig deeper, you'll be learning the skills to explore

more deeply in the passage of Scripture and the context of Paul's letter to the Philippians. At the end of each day, you'll be prompted into a time of journaling prayer, so you can talk to and hear from God as He draws you more deeply into a life that really matters.

When + Where

Before starting this study, consider when in your day would best provide some uninterrupted time to dig in. I know finding time can be so difficult in our busy lives, thanks to jobs, kids, and other responsibilities. But we make time for the things that matter—and I promise, time meeting God through His Word is so worth it.

Personally, though I'm certainly not a morning person (hello, coffee), my brain is most attentive in the morning . . . plus, I really love having time with the Lord to center myself before the chaos of the day begins. Through the years, my family notices when I haven't done this for a few days—my joy, patience, and kindness just isn't what it usually is when I'm in the Word at the start of the day!

Simply can't get up any earlier than you currently do? Maybe you work shifts or have little ones not yet sleeping all the way through the night. I get it, and I've been there. I still encourage you to give God the firstfruits of your time, though. Throughout the Bible, we are encouraged to give the first and best to the Lord. And though we may not have a first crop of corn or a perfect lamb to present to Him, we certainly can give Him the first of our time—not the leftovers. Even if rising earlier in the morning feels impossible in this season, you can still offer Him your firstfruits. Pack a bag with your Bible and this study and do it at the beginning of your lunch hour at work, first break between classes, or the first moments of your child's naptime. The laundry, dishes, and showering can wait. Put Him first.

What You'll Need

This study is meant both to guide you through the book of Philippians and to equip you to forge your own path through God's Word so He

can make it alive in your everyday life. As you begin your study, here are a few things to keep on hand:

- A Bible in your favorite translation
- Your phone with the Blue Letter Bible app and BibleGateway or YouVersion downloaded
- A pen (you'll find space to write as we explore the book of Philippians together, but also feel free to scribble in the margins as you need to!)
- A smartphone with internet access so you can watch the short videos that introduce each week (you can find those at GetWisdomBibleStudies.com).
- A place without distraction where you can truly dig in!

One Last Thing

A final note to remember as we go through this study: The Bible was written for us, but it's not written *to* us. The Bible is full of stories, poetry, laws, parables, and such, which were written for people who lived in a different culture thousands of years before any of us were born. So each week in this study, we're going to explore some of the behind-the-scenes aspects of Scripture. We're going to figure out the historical and cultural background. We'll try to learn the *why* of it all.

We need to become not just readers of the Word . . . but *studiers* of it. Only then can we understand what God has *for* us in His Word.

LIVING FOR WHAT REALLY MATTERS

What do our lives say about what we think really matters? We glorify busyness—and yet we also acknowledge that hustle leads to burnout. Our mantras are “progress, not perfection” and “my current situation is not my final destination,” yet we feel hopeless and pessimistic when life isn't “how it should be.”

But what if it's only *pointless* hustle that leads to burnout? What if

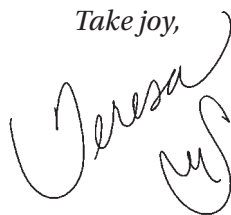
struggle can be valuable if we allow it to lead us to growth and depth? What if trading “likes” and approval for authenticity leads to joy?

Philippians is often referred to as the “joy book” of the Bible—and though it’s true that Paul speaks eloquently about joy throughout, we can miss the powerful statement he’s making about life in Christ if we focus on joy alone. This book is not just about joy manufactured out of nowhere: It is, most profoundly, about the fundamental reality of what it means to live for Jesus among the people of Jesus. It’s about unity and community, authenticity and dependence on God no matter the season . . . and out of that, deep and meaningful joy. This—not success, not achievement, not independence, not comfort—is the life that really matters.

As we journey together through the book of Philippians, let’s learn how to intentionally develop lives that make a difference—by growing deep roots in community and blossoming in the midst of whatever we face.

Let’s get to it!

Take joy,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Teresa", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.



WEEK 1

Living in Authenticity

Philippians 1:1-11

WEEK 1 • *Day 1*

READ ACTS 9

I used to write out exactly what I was going to say when I broke up with someone. One time in college, I wrote and rewrote my break-up monologue for an entire week straight. I penned it during every class, every study break, and any other time I had a few minutes to myself. I had a *really* hard time telling people what needed to be said.

Our buddy Paul, though? Not so much.

In the book of Philippians, Paul has some hard conversations with the church in Philippi. He says what needs to be said, encourages what needs encouragement, and corrects what needs correcting. Paul doesn't sugarcoat anything.

My husband is this way. He's always quick to tell me when I hurt his feelings or if my tone with the kids was harsher than I'd intended. He gives me ideas on how I can lead more effectively, and he's up front when he needs more us-time. Maybe that's why I like Paul so much. After years of living with someone who gives it to me straight, I understand the importance of real, authentic conversation. Sometimes these kinds of conversations are empowering. Sometimes they're not super fun. But since Ben's words are coming from a place of love, I know they're not meant to harm. We meet in authenticity to help each other grow. Sweeping things under the rug or being passive-aggressive isn't beneficial or healthy.

If we want to be bold, dynamic women of God, we need to be willing to fight for authenticity in community. We have one life to live—one shot to make a mark on this earth in the name of Jesus Christ. And with Paul as our teacher, we'll learn how to do that.

But if we're going to learn from Paul, we need to first understand a bit more about who this man is. Now, I do realize you may know Paul's backstory already, but as we walk through it again, God may

point something out to you that somehow reflects and refracts differently today. God likes to highlight things at certain times, as He wants you to know, learn, and grow.

In Acts, we learn that Saul (Paul's original Hebrew name) hated those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. If we look at Philippians 3:5, we can get a sense why he felt this way: Not only was he from a Jewish family, but he was a devout and legalistic Pharisee. This new faith seemed like heresy to him.

1. What does Acts 9:1-2 say about Saul?

Saul's conversion is incredible. God intervenes in a dramatic and supernatural way—and He steps into the path of someone no one thought would ever become a Christian.

Do you know someone like that? A person you've been praying for, and yet it just seems so unlikely that they'd turn from their current lifestyle and become a new creation? But the beginning of Paul's story tells us something extraordinary: We serve a limitless God who often does the unlikely.



History Lesson

We know that God changed Abram's name to Abraham (Genesis 17:5), Sarai to Sarah (Genesis 17:15), and Jacob to Israel (Genesis 32:28). And most of us probably thought God did the same to Saul, whom we know as Paul in the New Testament. But is that really what happened? Let's find out.

- When Jesus speaks to him on the road to Damascus, he addresses him as Saul: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4).

- When Ananias speaks to him after his conversion, he also calls him Saul: “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17).
- When Paul was called out before his first missionary trip, the Holy Spirit refers to him as Saul: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2).

In fact, after his conversion, Paul is referred to as Saul fourteen times!¹ Hmm. So . . . what’s the deal? Why did his name change?

The shift from Saul to Paul happens as he sets sail for his missionary journeys. In Acts 13:9, we see Saul is called “Paul” for the first time on the island of Cyprus, which is much later than his conversion. Luke, the author of Acts, indicates in this verse that these two names are interchangeable: “But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him.”

Saul was the Hebrew form of his name; Paul was the Roman form. He uses the name Paul as he continues to travel and share the Good News of Jesus to mostly non-Jewish individuals throughout the Mediterranean. The shift in names is a sign of Paul’s desire to be approachable in the way he shared the gospel, using language and even his name in a way unique audiences could relate to (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).²

In Acts 9:10-11, we see God ask a man named Ananias to do something that seemed crazy: to go meet up with Saul. Ananias knows of this man named Saul of Tarsus and all the horrible things he’s been a part of in and around Jerusalem. In fact, the first time we

hear Saul's name in the Bible is during the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr:

Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

ACTS 7:58

Can you imagine being asked to meet with this kind of man? Ananias probably felt like he was being asked to go to his death!

2. How does Ananias initially respond to God?

3. How does the Lord reply to Ananias' concern? (Hint: See verses 15-16.)

God knows something Ananias doesn't: The man who had spent so much time persecuting Christians is now a completely new person.

4. Flip over to 2 Corinthians 5:17. What happens when we follow Jesus?

You can make yourself better, but only Christ can make you new. And if ever there was someone who became a new creation, it was Paul.

So what exactly does *new* mean, anyway? Let's go to the BLB app to find out. Head to 2 Corinthians 5 and click on verse 17. Tap on the *Interlinear* and scroll down to find the word *new* or *kainos* (καινός, pronounced *kai-nos*).[†] Click on the word to find English synonyms and descriptions from *Outline of Biblical Usage*, *Strong's Definitions*, and *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, as well as all the other New Testament verses that use *kainos*.

5. Pen down what *kainos* means:

I absolutely love how *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* explains this word: “recently made, fresh, recent, unused, unworn.”³ So often as Christians, we talk about being restored . . . but this verse reveals that we're *more* than restored. Restored would mean we're just a new-and-improved version of what we were before. But this verse here in 2 Corinthians tells us that no matter what we've done or how we've lived, in Christ, we are *brand new*.

What does that tell us about Paul? When he chose to follow Jesus, his history against the church was wiped out, wiped clean. It doesn't mean there weren't consequences (like having to build trust and demonstrate the authenticity of his newness to Ananias and a multitude of believers), but in God's eyes, there is no *before*—there is only *now* and *evermore*.

[†] In random order, the theme of these answers are: *declares his confidence in God, complains of his circumstances, sings praise to God, lifts his heart in prayer.*

6. If Paul was made completely new the moment he chose to follow Jesus, why do you think Jesus blinded Paul? Just share your best guess.
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Paul's blindness could only be explained as an encounter with Jesus Christ Himself. And being blind allowed Paul to live undistracted for several days. He likely played and replayed the experience in his head and reflected on all his years of misunderstanding what it meant to truly love and follow God. But I don't think that's all. I wonder if Jesus was using literal blindness to show Paul that he had been living a life of spiritual blindness. As Paul's sight was restored, so was his relationship with Jesus and his understanding of his new life with the Creator of the universe.

History Lesson

The New Testament is comprised of twenty-seven books, thirteen of which are attributed to Paul. Additionally, about half of the book of Acts (written by Luke) is filled with stories of Paul's life and works. Scholars debate whether Paul also wrote Hebrews. If he did, he would have contributed fourteen books (or 51.85 percent of the entire New Testament!). Of these epistles, only seven are accepted as "being entirely authentic and dictated by St. Paul himself." The others are thought to have been written by others on behalf of this dynamic apostle.⁴ Paul was obviously influential in spreading the gospel in the days of the early church.

DATE	EPISTLE	CONTEXT
AD 52–53	1 and 2 Thessalonians	after second missionary journey began
AD 57–58	1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans	after third missionary journey began
AD 62	Ephesians, Philemon, Colossians, and Philippians	during Paul's first Roman imprisonment
AD 63	1 Timothy and Titus	after being acquitted
AD 66	2 Timothy	during Paul's second Roman imprisonment

As we consider Paul's "newness"—and by extension, the being-made-new that each of us experiences when we follow Jesus—we might find ourselves wondering how this utter transformation happens. Look again at Acts 9:15. God told Ananias, "He [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine." When I look at this verse in the *Interlinear* section of the BLB, I see that *instrument* (*skeuos*; σκεῦος, pronounced *skyoo-os*) also means "vessel."⁵ Like the white geometric vase on my desk, which is filled with beautiful flowers, a vessel *contains* something. Is *filled* with something. God hand-selected this vessel (Paul) that once contained judgment and pharisaical law, removed his spiritual blindness, and made him new . . . and now the vessel is filled with the Holy Spirit. We know from Galatians that as we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we pour out the fruit of the Spirit—which is the very character of God.

7. What fruit of the Spirit might you expect to see emerge in Paul's writings? (Hint: See Galatians 5:22-23.)

The book of Philippians gives us a vivid picture of the fruit of the Spirit, as Paul writes to his Philippian friends about living aligned with the Good News of Jesus: love, not legalism; unity, not discord; authentic faith, not counterfeit religion.

When Paul's eyesight returned, he saw the world with new eyes because he truly was a new creation. Gentiles (non-Jews) that he once despised and looked down on became his friends. The body of Christ (the early church) that he once persecuted became his family. Nothing was the same after his encounter with Jesus. Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ became his only goal, and he willingly left the safety of his old life to share the Good News with the world. Three missionary journeys took him through areas of the globe where people had yet to hear the name of Jesus, and he faced almost constant danger:

²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:25-27

If we flip back over to Acts 9:16, we see that God let Ananias in on what lay in store for this murderer-turned-apostle. The Lord knew that Paul would suffer “for the sake of [His] name.” Yet, because Paul-made-new was filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, he could see God's deeper purpose in every struggle. The struggle was not beyond the reach of God, and every bit of pain was worth God's Kingdom reaching the ends of the earth.

I'm sure Paul sometimes felt unqualified and inadequate in the face of such a difficult calling. But you know what? When we feel unqualified and inadequate, we can fully lean on the One who *is* able to do all things.

This is important for us to realize: If we feel capable and qualified for God's task, we're probably leaning on our own power and ability instead of God's, which means we're either out of step with what He's asking or we're about to struggle mightily in pursuit of the calling.

8. Do you feel capable and qualified in your calling? Where have you gotten comfortable, and do you think you might be missing something more that God is calling you to?

God qualifies the called; He doesn't call the qualified. That's certainly true of Paul. He had participated in persecution and murder of God's people. I'm sure he often felt massively over his head as he faced persecution and prison.

But guess what—being over our heads is a *good* thing. If we're living in self-reliance and self-sufficiency, we've made ourselves god. God wants us to join Him in His Kingdom work, and to be up to that task, we have to recognize our insufficiency and lean on His ultimate sufficiency.

God doesn't want us to simply *look* the part of a new creation—He wants us to *be* a new creation. This newness equals freedom in Him. And freedom in Him creates opportunity. How do we make the most of this freedom and opportunity? We give our whole self to Him. We open our hands and give our all to Him. We say the words “send me”—even before we understand where and how we will be sent. This is the only way we are qualified: as vessels filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul's life was so radically changed after his encounter with Jesus that his entire existence became about sharing the redeeming love of the Cross. Paul cared little about who others thought he *should* be, or about what he “gave up” in choosing to follow Jesus. Instead, Paul leaned into authentic truth, integrity, and unity. I love what John Piper says about Paul:

He does not need my approval. He doesn't fear my rejection. He does not have his finger in the air to discern how the winds of culture are blowing. He is authentic.⁶

Isn't this the type of woman we want to be? I don't want to do things simply for the approval of others. I don't want to fear rejection or internet trolls. I don't want to change my stance or my direction with the winds of culture. I want to be authentic and live in authentic relationships with others. And I have a feeling you do too.



Spend some time in prayer, talking to God about places in your life where you struggle to live authentically. Ask Him to give you the trust and freedom to live wholly in who He has created you to be.

Amen.

WEEK 1 • *Day 2*

READ ACTS 16:6-40

I love seeing women of God making a difference for the Kingdom of God. And our heavenly Father does too. That's why I was delighted when I realized that the Philippian church existed in part because of several women who fell in love with Jesus. They hadn't met Jesus, and they hadn't yet met Paul, but the Good News about Jesus had spread to their city—and their hearts responded.

Even before he met the women of Philippi, Paul saw women as valuable partners in the gospel. Did you know that the first convert in Europe was a woman who founded the first European Christian church with Paul?⁷ (We'll hear more about Lydia in a bit.) Women weren't included within the twelve disciples because these twelve were to signify the twelve tribes of Israel, but on the day of Pentecost (when the Holy Spirit was poured out), God showed the world that He was doing something even bigger, empowering both men and women to spread the name of Jesus Christ:

I will pour out my Spirit
 on every kind of people:
 Your sons will prophesy,
 also your daughters;
 Your young men will see visions,
 your old men dream dreams.
 When the time comes,
 I'll pour out my Spirit
 On those who serve me, men and women both,
 and they'll prophesy.

ACTS 2:16-17, MSG

The people who led were men *and* women, converted Jew *and* Gentile, circumcised *and* uncircumcised. We know God loves diversity, and we see that here as a new season unfolds. Nothing was the same as it was before. Everything was new and uncharted.

The New Testament indicates that the gospel radically altered the position of women, elevating them to a partnership with men unparalleled in first-century society. Wherever the gospel went, women were among the first, foremost and most faithful converts. The gospel led them to engage in aspects of Christ's service that went beyond the cultural limitations of the day. As Ben Witherington III observes, "In the post-Easter community we find women assuming a greater variety of roles, some of which . . . would have been forbidden to a Jewish woman (e.g., being a teacher of men in Acts 18:24-6)."⁸

History Lesson

Another female leader in the New Testament was Priscilla (she and her husband, Aquila, led a church in Ephesus—and later, another one in Rome). If you read their story in Acts 18, you may have noticed that her name is usually mentioned first. This suggests she is the more noteworthy and prominent leader of the two. Priscilla is even listed first when she and her husband explained theology and doctrine to Apollos in Acts 18:24-26. Paul specifically names this amazing couple on several occasions (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). What an incredible woman Priscilla must have been!

As Paul headed out on his second missionary journey, he planned to take the gospel to Asia. But in Acts 16, we learn that God put a big red light on Paul’s plan—because He had bigger and better plans:

⁶⁻⁸They went to Phrygia, and then on through the region of Galatia. Their plan was to turn west into Asia province, but the Holy Spirit blocked that route. So they went to Mysia and tried to go north to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn’t let them go there either. Proceeding on through Mysia, they went down to the seaport Troas.

⁹⁻¹⁰That night Paul had a dream: A Macedonian stood on the far shore and called across the sea, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” The dream gave Paul his map. We went to work at once getting things ready to cross over to Macedonia. All the pieces had come together. We knew now for sure that God had called us to preach the good news to the Europeans.

ACTS 16:6-10, MSG

Did you notice verse 6 says the Holy Spirit “blocked” that route? The Greek word used here is κωλύω (pronounced *kōlyō*) and literally means “to hinder, prevent, forbid,” “to withhold a thing,” “to deny or refuse one a thing.”⁹ I don’t know how they understood God was blocking them. Perhaps they weren’t allowed entrance, or maybe something in their gut told them not to proceed. Whatever the case, God didn’t want them in Asia at this point, and in a vivid dream, He directed Paul somewhere else.

God has certainly blocked my way many times before. In my book *Beautifully Interrupted*, I wrote about how the life I live now is not the one I thought I wanted. My plan was to get a doctorate in art history, move to Europe, work as a curator at some fantastic museum . . . and kids? They weren’t in my five-year, ten-year, or really *any-year* plan.

But one day I realized I'd never consulted God in any of my plans. As the tattoo on my right wrist now reminds me, I prayed the words "send me." I wish God had told me exactly where to go—but instead of knowing what to do, I almost immediately knew what I *wasn't* supposed to do. And that was continue pursuing art history. He most certainly blocked and forbade that route for me because He had something bigger and more exciting. I see that now, looking back. But at the time, I didn't obey without dragging my feet.

1. Has God ever blocked the path you were going down? What happened? How did you respond?
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As we continue reading, we learn that Paul and his travel buddies sailed for Samothrace, then on to Neapolis, and from there, they hoofed it to Philippi. *The Message* says Philippi was "the main city in that part of Macedonia and, even more importantly, a Roman colony," and that they "lingered there several days" (Acts 16:11-12).

On the day of Sabbath, Paul and his companions sought a place to worship. They heard about a prayer meeting held along the river-side, and so they found it and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

2. Why do you think Paul and his companions didn't go to a synagogue to pray and worship?
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To find our answer to this question, we'll need to back up and learn a little about the city itself.

History Lesson

When they were attacked by Thracians, the inhabitants of this city, previously known as Krenides, sought protection from Philip II of Macedon (the father of Alexander the Great!). Knowing the land was rich in gold, Philip responded by capturing the city himself circa 357 BCE (so much for looking to Philip for help!) and renamed it Philippi.

Years later, after Mark Antony and Octavian took revenge on Julius Caesar's assassins, Brutus and Cassius, Philippi became a military outpost and Roman colony. Because the city teemed with Roman troops, it was often referred to as "little Rome."¹⁰

Self-governing and independent, Philippi was a bit of a melting pot. Because no synagogue existed, we know that not even ten Jewish males resided within the city limits. But, as Paul and his friends knew, when a city did not have a synagogue, those who loved God would meet by the river to pray and worship.

Lydia was likely a Gentile who had heard of the incredible name of Jesus (John 12:20 shows that news of Jesus' miraculous healings had begun spreading to the people of Greece). She's the only woman named in this passage, so it's likely that although she had never met Jesus and had never been formally taught the gospel, she was leading the meeting.

Isn't it interesting that we don't hear of any men at this prayer meeting, and yet Luke (the author of Acts) says, "We sat down and spoke to the women who had come together" (Acts 16:13)? In those days, Jewish men and women didn't worship together. They even had different sections in the synagogue. Once again, however, we see that

tide changing within the community of Jesus followers as men and women come together in their love of Jesus.

3. What do we learn about Lydia in Acts 16:14-15?

History Lesson

Because Lydia sold “purple goods,” her customers would have been the wealthy elite, as extracting this dye took a substantial amount of labor and it was highly valued. Tyrian purple, derived from marine mollusks, was especially costly: extracting this dye involved tens of thousands of snails and was quite arduous. Lydia’s hometown of Thyatira was well-known for manufacturing a less expensive and more reddish dye from roots of the madder plant (known today as “Turkey red”). However, since Scripture specifically describes her as a seller of purple (*porphyropōlis*; πορφυρόπωλις, pronounced *por-foo-ror-o-lis*) goods, she was likely selling textiles of the more valuable Tyrian purple.¹¹

I love so many things about Lydia and Paul’s interaction. She wasted no time telling her entire household everything she learned from Paul as the Lord opened her heart to His wisdom. And *then* she opened her home to Paul and his companions!

Opening my door and inviting people in is something God asked me to do years ago when I was relatively new to Denver and had no friends. Although we were fixing up a previously uninhabitable house at the time, I decided to obey and offer what I had with a thankful heart. I welcomed in anyone I could possibly think of.

Lydia was a successful businesswoman who likely had a large and

beautiful home, but that makes her invitation no less meaningful. She knew the importance of creating a space for all to gather. No matter what your environment, your home is *enough* to act as a welcome and safe place for others—and you can open your door too.

As they enjoyed Lydia's warm hospitality, Paul and his three companions frequented the riverside to pray, worship, and teach the gospel. Here they faced a challenge: Day after day, a demon-possessed slave girl followed them around, shouting, "These men are slaves like me, but slaves of the Most High God! They will proclaim to you the way of liberation!" (Acts 16:17, VOICE).

Finally, after many days, the annoyance of her disturbance got the best of Paul, and he cast out the spirit of divination (*pythōn*; πύθων) that lived within her.

History Lesson

The spirit within this slave girl was *python*, a term referring to the mythical snake said to guard the oracle at Delphi. Ancient Greeks believed Delphi to be the center of the world and the term *python* had come to be used of the persons through whom the python guard supposedly spoke and predicted the future.¹²

After Paul cast out the demon, her owners were livid because their fortune-teller would no longer make them money. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the chief leaders of the city.

4. Reread Acts 16:22-24. What happened to Paul and Silas as a result of this situation?

Wait—didn't God direct Paul and his companions to Philippi? Didn't He orchestrate their meeting Lydia and teaching the women at the river, and even healing that poor girl who was a victim of slavery?

Here's the thing we can't forget: *We can be 100 percent following God's will and still go through hard stuff.* Sometimes God's will *takes* us through the hard stuff because He has a purpose in it.

Difficulty brings a rich wisdom that can't be formed elsewhere. If you can have joy in the darkness, you truly understand life with Christ. I'm not saying it's easy. I'm not even saying you'll feel clarity and understanding during every second of hard seasons. But I can promise that clinging to and loving Christ in the midst of even the bleakest situations will develop you into a woman of incredible depth, strength, and empathy.

Think for a moment about the painful circumstances Paul and Silas found themselves in—and the way they chose to respond. Can you imagine being fastened into stocks and still spending hours praying and singing hymns?

I've seen enough movies to understand the concept of stocks. And when I tap on this verse (Acts 16:24) in the BLB app and find the definition in the *Interlinear*, my visualization is confirmed:

stocks (*xylon* or ξύλον, pronounced *ksoo-lon*): “a log or timber with holes in which the feet, hands, neck of prisoners were inserted and fastened with thongs” (strips of leather)¹³

I'm truly not sure how you could breathe, let alone sing, while tortured and bent in this way, yet Paul and Silas did so loudly enough that the guards and prisoners were listening. Everyone around them got to see the depth of their relationship with God, even in the midst of an awful situation. Without God allowing Paul and Silas's imprisonment, these men in the jail would not have learned of the love and light of Jesus in such an incredible way.

5. What happened around midnight? (See Acts 16:25-27.)

6. Why would the guard respond by wanting to kill himself?

The guard knew that he would be tortured to death for his failure to keep the prisoners in their cells, so he decided to kill himself swiftly. But Paul, realizing what was about to happen, shouted that they were all still there.

7. After realizing that the prisoners had not escaped, why do you think the jailer rushed in and asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved?

The jailer's entire household was saved and baptized that night. Isn't that incredible? First Lydia (and her household), then the slave girl, and now the jailer (and his family). Paul's plans were diverted, and yet God used every part of his difficulties to bring forth a new community of believers. And as Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi, though he is again imprisoned, he writes to a church that is firmly rooted and thriving, living for what really matters. All because Paul chose to follow God and thrive no matter what circumstances he faced.



Talk to God about your struggles and pain. Ask Him to open your eyes to what He may be doing through those hard things. God can handle our hurt and even our anger. He wants you to pour out your whole heart to Him.

Amen.

WEEK 1 • Day 3



READ PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2

Many years ago, one of my friends sent me a beautiful little book out of the blue: *The Art of the Handwritten Note*.¹⁴ Those delightful pages taught me that the structure of our words means something, and so does the way we open and end a letter. I think Paul would have liked that book. He was all about purposefully placing words in a greeting, his words dripping with power and intentionality.

In the opening of this letter in Philippians 1:1-4, Paul isn't simply greeting the church. Yes, technically that *is* what he's doing, but he's

doing so much more than that. Let's look closer. Paul isn't one to waste a single syllable:

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with
the overseers and deacons:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the
Lord Jesus Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2

Head to Philippians 1 in the BLB. Once there, tap on verse 1, and then select *Interlinear*. Scroll down to the term *bond-servants*, and tap on *doulos* (δοῦλος, pronounced *doo-los*).

1. What does the word *bond-servant* mean?

Paul and Timothy aren't held captive by Christ Jesus, working for Him under duress. Paul is saying that they were purchased by Christ for a price—one that He paid on the cross. In the same way, each of us who follows Jesus is now free, slave (to sin) no more. But, while acknowledging that freedom, Paul also uses this word to illustrate his wholehearted commitment to his Master (Jesus). In other words, because of his freedom, he obediently serves.

As we continue, we see Paul refer to the body of believers in Philippi with an interesting term: *saints*.

2. What does this word *saint* make you think of?

When I hear the word *saint*, I'm reminded of my Catholic friends talking about patron saints of things like illnesses, places, or occupations. In fact, Lydia is the patron saint of dyeing because of her purple-dye business mentioned in Acts 16. There's a lot that goes into receiving the title of Saint, not the least of which is that the person needs to be deceased. So Paul is obviously using the word in a different way here. Let's head again to the BLB and find out what he means.

3. Open up the *Interlinear* section of Philippians 1:1. What does this word *saints* (*hagios*; ἅγιος, pronounced *ha-gee-os*) mean?

4. Using what we've learned from the expanded definition of *saints* (*hagios*; ἅγιος), how would you describe them (us)?

History Lesson

In the early church, the title of *saint* (*hagios*; ἅγιος) was essentially used in the same way the term *Christian* is today. But did you know *Christian* was initially a mocking term?

²⁵ Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

ACTS 11:25-26

Antioch was a melting pot, referred to as "all the world in one

city.”¹⁵ Antiochians saw the various Jewish sects as one large group, but the people who followed Jesus were different: Suddenly, Jews and Gentiles were coming together as one people. Quickly seeing the difference between Judaism and Jesus, a different name was needed, so the Antiochians coined the term *little Christs*, or *Christians*. This occurrence in Acts 11 is the first time we read the word *Christians* (*Christianos*; Χριστιανός, pronounced *khrees-tee-a-nos*) in the Bible. It is thought that originally the term was used sneeringly of Jesus followers, like we see in Acts 26:28: “But Agrippa did answer: ‘Keep this up much longer and you’ll make a Christian out of me!’” (MSG). But the early church claimed the term, happily acknowledging the desire to be little Christs.

In the opening of his letter, Paul wasn’t simply acknowledging the *people* of Philippi or even the *body of believers* in Philippi. He was reminding them that they were *sacred, holy, and consecrated*. Moreover, the Greek word for *saints* in this passage is almost always plural, illustrating that this whole community is set apart for the Lord. This is important, because as Paul moves on to address bishops and deacons, he does so in the context of the larger community. Scripture doesn’t share specifically what a bishop or deacon did in the early church, but this leadership wasn’t *over* the fellowship of believers. Rather, the bishops and deacons were *part* of the set-apart community. How do we know that? Let’s again look at the words Paul used in Philippians 1.

5. Circle the first word in the phrase below:

with the bishops and deacons (NRSV)

With. If we look at that term in the BLB, we discover that the word literally means “including,” denoting “togetherness,” “union,” and “completeness.”¹⁶ That doesn’t seem much like a hierarchy, does

it? Instead, Paul seems to acknowledge that the bishops and deacons are *leading alongside*.

God invented leadership, and He knew the best way forward for the growing church as it spread the gospel: not leadership that placed people *under* but leaders who worked *alongside*.

This was a big deal. God turned the tables on the way things used to be. You see, before Jesus' death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, the only person who had direct access to God was the high priest. A few leaders and prophets were given the gift of personal relationship with God (Moses and Joshua, for example), and in those cases, it was because God Himself had given them a specific task. The normal person—like you and me—didn't have access to God.

But when Jesus died for our sins, the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the everyday people tore (Matthew 27:51), and God changed everything. He now places us in the company of high priests (1 Peter 2:9) and gives us every privilege and gift of that position.

The leaders of the church in Philippi and the leaders of our churches are on the same playing field as each of us. They are not leading from above, but alongside. No person is higher or more valuable in the eyes of God than anyone else. We can lead people to Christ from wherever we work, live, and stand.

Because of this, leaders of the church need to consider themselves first as a member of the body or community and second as someone who guides. The leaders and the led all make mistakes and sin, we are all saved by grace, and all are wholly and completely dependent on God's mercy and goodness.



Pray for the local church, your community and city, and our nation as a whole to open their hearts to God. Ask the Lord to help us Jesus followers get out of our own way and live in a way that represents Him fully as we pursue the greatest two commandments, which are given by Jesus Himself:

“Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.” This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: “Love others as well as you love yourself.”

MATTHEW 22:37-40, MSG

Amen.

WEEK 1 • Day 4



READ PHILIPPIANS 1:3-8

Early in the morning on the first Sunday of December 2017, I received an urgent text from my friend and pastor, Nirup Alphonse: *Hey T—Please pray. The team showed up to get the trailer and start setting up church this morning, and it’s gone. Meeting up with them now.*

At the time, our church was mobile, a set-up-and-tear-down gathering that uses space at the high school—and that trailer held everything from our screen and A/V system to our tithe baskets, Bibles, and coffee maker and cups (you know, the important stuff). Over a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of what we would have said was important stuff was in the trailer—and someone had taken all of it in the night.

Did we cancel church that morning? No way. We settled in tightly, squeezing close to one another as we worshiped and learned from Nirup's sermon. It was one of the most beautiful and meaningful services I've ever been part of. One of our local Denver news channels referred to the theft as a "Holy Heist"—and we kept not only the term but the lessons we learned from it.

Now on the first Sunday of December each year—the first Sunday of Advent—we also celebrate Holy Heist Sunday. We strip down to the basics. We don't use our lights and big sound system. We don't put up our screen and projector. We pass around Starbucks bags as we give our tithe. We go back to the essentials: community, the message of Jesus, and a whole lot of prayer.

Nirup often calls our community a House of Prayer, and we certainly were after the Holy Heist. Our relatively new little church plant didn't have a hundred thousand dollars in the bank to repurchase everything, but God generously answered our requests. First, a few larger local churches called, saying they had a check for us. And then smaller churches reached out with that same message. A body of believers out of state said they were sending money. Even a brand-new church that had only been open a Sunday or two generously gave to our little House of Prayer. We were astounded. And humbled. And thankful to be part of a community that also believes in the power of prayer.

A few days ago, we learned from Acts 16 that the church in Philippi was also a place of prayer. In fact, the church was literally born out of an outdoor House of Prayer by the river. And we discover in the letter to the Philippians that remembering and advocating for the believers in prayer was an integral part of Paul's relationship with this young church.

What if our lives were the same—built on a foundation of prayer? It might be easy to say we want that, but when we really stop to think about it, we might feel a bit daunted. Most of us believe in the power of prayer, yet we spend an incredibly small amount of time each day

actually doing it. Not that we don't *want* to or that we don't think it's important. We just . . . don't do it much. (I certainly struggle with that!)

1. What does prayer look like in your life?

Here in Philippians 1:3, Paul says he thanks God every time he thinks about this group of believers. And he uses an interesting word for *thanks*: *eucharisteō* (εὐχαριστέω; pronounced *yoo-khar-is-teh-o*).

2. Does this word sound familiar to you at all? Why or why not?

The Eucharist is the celebration and remembrance of the Last Supper, which we observe today by taking Communion. We can find this word throughout the New Testament—and every time, it is used in conjunction with prayer (Acts 28:15; Romans 1:8; Ephesians 5:20). The Greek word *eucharisteō* literally means “to give thanks,” “to be grateful, feel thankful.”¹⁷

When one of our Ethiopian sons joined our family at the age of almost seven, he renamed himself Ezekiel. While we understood his decision—sometimes, adopted children choose a new name to express leaving one season of life and entering another—we were a

bit wistful about the change. My husband and I adored the name his mama had given him: Temesgen (pronounced Tom-es-gen). In Ethiopia, *Temesgen* means the overwhelming, deep adoration and thankfulness you feel in your heart toward God. What a beautiful and significant name!

This is the kind of thankfulness I believe *eucharisteō* points us toward. Thankfulness with incredible depth and significance. One that consumes the innermost portions of our hearts and spills out into the world around us.

Eucharisteo means “to give thanks,” and give is a verb, something that we do. God calls me to do thanks. To give the thanks away. That thanks-giving might literally become thanks-living. That our lives become the very blessings we have received.

*I am blessed. I can bless. Imagine!
I could let Him make me the gift!*

I could be the joy!¹⁸

ANN VOSKAMP

3. How would you describe your feelings of thankfulness in your life and relationship with God? In what ways could you move more toward *Temesgen* and *eucharisteō* thankfulness?
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Of course, maybe you feel like thankfulness just isn't compatible with the difficult season you're in. But remember—when Paul writes this letter to Philippi, he's in a Roman prison. He's awaiting trial, and he knows he may lose his life because of his love for Jesus. Even so—Paul praises God, joyfully thanking Him for his friends.

4. Consider a hard season you have walked through or are currently in. How have you fought for joy? Where has God met you with unexpected joy?
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Paul's joy isn't just obligatory. In fact, these verses resound with exultation:

Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-6, MSG

Wouldn't you love someone to give you a compliment like that? *I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer.* Paul rejoices in the good work God has done in the lives of these people, and he quickly tells them that “there has never been

the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish.”

Arriving at this flourishing finish isn't a passive thing. God is doing this great work in us, and He has promised to keep at it. But will we keep at it too? Will we learn to appreciate the work in progress, to listen to how He is calling us to grow, to pursue Him in the midst of the in-between? We are all becoming more like Him, and we have the privilege of joining Him in that work.

5. Flip over to Psalm 37:4 and write it down:

6. What do you think this verse means?

King David penned these words as part of a song in his later years, when he could look back and see the significance of the Lord's hand through every moment of his life. So we shouldn't read these words flippantly. God is not Santa Claus, who gives us things as long as we ask and we've been *good little girls*. This verse isn't saying that we can have anything we want as long as we ask.

But what David *is* saying is that when we delight ourselves in the Lord and spend time with Him through His Word and prayer, something begins to shift. The position of our heart starts to line up with God's. His desires become our desires. We long for the things He longs for.

As Paul prays for his friends—even while he sits in prison—he can hang on to joy because he delights in the Lord. He's doing the opposite of complaining in these verses because he's fully aligned

with God's heart for the Philippians. Paul has seen the Creator of the universe do great and mighty things, and that reality brings him immense joy.

Paul shares in verse 7,

It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

PHILIPPIANS 1:7

It doesn't matter if he's thrown in jail or standing on trial for spreading the gospel; Paul is unshaken, because he remembers the worth of all he does in the name of Jesus Christ. Nothing can alter what God has put into motion. Paul is reminding the Philippians of this, and when we read his words, we are also reminded that nothing—not our poor decisions, not our struggles, not our sin or the sin of others—can prevent God's plan from happening.

If he has said it will be so, it will be so.

If God has put something on your heart and you know without a shadow of a doubt that it is from Him, don't worry about the timing of it all. Press on. Continue praying and laying that foundation in your life. Grow in wisdom and knowledge by spending time in the Word. Be deeply rooted, and watch your heart align with His. He will bring His plans for you to fruition.



Meditate on 2 Thessalonians 1:11 and ask the Lord to calm your heart as you meet with Him in prayer. Remember—if He's prompted you to do something in faith, He will accomplish it.

All this is why we are constantly praying for you, so God will make you worthy of the great calling you have received from

Him and will give you the power to accomplish every good intention and work of faith.

2 THESSALONIANS 1:11, VOICE

Amen.

WEEK 1 • Day 5



READ PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11

When my kids were all still really little, I started writing their names next to certain passages in my Bible, dedicating specific ones to each child. I even printed out some of those verses and scrapbooked cute little plaques for each child, posting them just outside the doors to their rooms. I got the idea while reading this verse:

⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way,

and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5-9

Growing roots is just the beginning of God's work in us. When our roots are established and we bear fruit, part of that fruit is bringing the love and truth of God into the lives of those around us. I put those verses on my kids' doors—and I teach in my church, and I write these studies—because I want to teach the hows and whys of loving God to those I do life with. I want to teach it to my children, to my neighbors, my friends, and anyone I encounter.

1. In what ways do you bring God's Word into your everyday relationships?
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I smiled when I looked at our verses in my Bible today, because Ezekiel's name is next to Philippians 1:9-11. This passage is full of immense encouragement, but we're also going to dig into Paul's larger purpose in these words.

2. Write Philippians 1:9-11:
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3. One of the beautiful ways God's Word can minister to us is by giving us language for our prayers. Have you ever prayed names into Scripture? Read verses 9 to 11 again, and ask God to bring someone to mind. Fill their name into the blanks:

Lord Jesus, it is my prayer that _____'s love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that he/she may approve what is excellent, and so _____ may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. Father, may _____ be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. Amen!¹⁹

4. In addition to giving us language for prayer, God's Word can equip us to affirm and encourage others directly. Consider how someone might respond if you spoke those words over them:

_____, I *know* that your love *will* abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you, _____, *will* approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. _____, you *are* filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God!

Aren't these the kinds of words that speak life into another person? I learned the importance of life-giving words from my parents. When I was young and my brother Erik and I got caught being rude to each other, my folks would make us say five kind things about the other person as we apologized. I hated it. Erik hated it. But now as an adult I know the purpose of this exercise. If we want to build

up those around us—and, in the case of my brother and me, if we want to move toward relational restoration—we must speak words that give life. (Of course, Erik and I would roll our eyes and say lame or backhanded compliments along the lines of “I like your hair” or “Your face looks less stupid when you smile,” which of course thrilled our parents.)

Whenever I think of speaking life over someone, I immediately think of Donald Miller’s book *Scary Close*. As Donald struggled through broken relationship after broken relationship, his friend Bob Goff chose to love him well through his words:

“You don’t sound fine,” Bob said.

I’d have argued with him, but I was afraid he’d notice I was slurring my words.

“You know what I’ve noticed about you, Don?” Bob said.

“What’s that, Bob?”

“I’ve noticed you’re good at relationships.”

I said nothing. I wasn’t sure I understood him correctly. Then he said it again, right into the silence of the phone.

“You’re good at relationships, Don,” he repeated.

The truth is I hadn’t cried since I’d broken off the engagement. Like I said, I’d gone numb. But as he said those absurd words, something in me began to feel again and all the pain of the season swelled up. I pulled the phone from my ear, dropped my head on the desk, and wept. And as I cried, Bob kept repeating, “Don, you’re good at relationships. You’re still good at them. You’ve always been good at them.”²⁰

That’s the kind of mom, wife, friend I’d like to be. In our divided culture, too often we find ourselves retreating to angry, defensive words—and we forget about the transformative power of loving, life-giving words.

5. In what practical ways can you speak life into someone today?

Now, I mentioned earlier that Paul was specific and intentional in his prayer for the Philippians. We're going to look a little closer at what Paul prays for to find out why his words are so life-giving.

“It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more.” (Philippians 1:9)

The word that Paul uses here for *love* is *agapē* (ἀγάπη, pronounced *a-ga-pa*). The ancient Greek language has seven words for love, and *agapē* is the highest and most comprehensive form. *Agapē* is love without condition, built on selflessness, generosity, and compassion toward others. Jesus used the word *agapē* whenever He told us to love Him and love others. No fine print; no holds barred; no ifs, ands, or buts; no strings attached. This love is final and full and absolute. And that's what Paul is praying *may abound* in this verse.

6. Head on over to Philippians 1:9 in the BLB, tap on the verse, and select the phrase *may abound*. What does *perisseuō* (περισσεύω, pronounced *per-is-syoo-o*) mean?

That’s a *lot* of love, right? Paul doesn’t specify whom we should love this way, which can only mean one thing: We need to love everyone—whether or not we think they’re worthy or we like them or we want to. You know why? Because Jesus loves them (John 13:34-35).

“With knowledge and all discernment” (verse 9)

Paul is also asking that the Philippians’ love would abound “in knowledge and depth of insight” (NIV; “real knowledge and all discernment” in the NASB). (And don’t forget—while Paul is writing this to the Philippians, these words are also for us!)

Picking up my phone again and heading to this passage in the BLB, I see that *real knowledge* or *epignōsis* (ἐπίγνωσις, pronounced *ep-i-gno-sis*) means “precise and correct knowledge . . . of things ethical and divine.”²¹ Correct knowledge means to be in possession of precise and exact understanding of something. But how is this different from *discernment*?

7. Go to the *Interlinear* for Philippians 1:9 on the BLB, and look up *aisthēsis* (αἴσθησις, pronounced *ais-thay-sis*). How would you differentiate this from correct knowledge?

Discernment has to do with perception—understanding connected to our hearts and the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Knowledge has to do with information, understanding in relation to our brains. Discernment and knowledge are both important. Love doesn’t mean ignoring poor behavior, character, or choices; knowledge informs our understanding of right and wrong, wise and unwise. But even as we understand those things, discernment helps us to know how to respond—how to speak life and not judgment into other people. Discernment also leads us to guide, protect, and place boundaries.

Being discerning means being perceptive as you pore over what you know and apply knowledge in a practical way.

8. How can you be discerning without being judgmental?

In John 7:24, Jesus says to the crowd listening to Him, “Don’t be hypercritical; use your head—and heart!—to discern what is right, to test what is authentically right” (MSG). He is the perfect example of recognizing behavior as wrong and hating evil yet still showing compassion. It’s the very definition of discernment, right? Judging carries with it condemnation and a condescending attitude. We’re not to place someone beneath us; we’re to love them right where we both are, realizing that we all struggle.

“So that you may approve what is excellent” (verse 10)

The term *may approve* is translated as *dokimazō* (δοκιμάζω, pronounced *do-ki-mahd-zo*) which, as we learn from the BLB, essentially means “to test, examine, prove, scrutinise (to see whether a thing is genuine or not).”²² This term was particularly used when testing the authenticity of coins,²³ which feels like such a solid, visible example of the importance of authenticity. None of us want to have a pocket of fraudulent coinage . . . and none of us want a heart full of fraudulence and inauthenticity. By being able to discern what is best and substantial, we’re able to recognize what really matters in life.

I love the way *The Message* translates this passage:

This is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not

sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of.

I always want exact instructions in life. Like: If I do this, then that will happen. You know, $A + B = C$. I love that Paul gives us this type of instruction (we'll talk more about this in week 6). To live an authentic life, we need to "learn to love appropriately," to "use [our] head and test [our] feelings so that [our] love is sincere and intelligent." We need to "live a lover's life . . . a life Jesus will be proud of."

So let's be lovers of people. Not in a romantic way (though that's good too) but by striving to be the kind of woman who loves everybody. All the time. No matter what. That's a radical concept, isn't it? I know, I get it. I can think of people who are very different from me, who drive me nuts, who are even toxic or dangerous, and sometimes I think I don't want to—or even shouldn't—love them. The thing is: It doesn't say we need to be best friends with them or that we need to approve of their behavior. But we do need to love them as God loves them, because as much as we'd like to turn our backs from the fact sometimes, they are His children too. He loves those hard-to-like people every bit as much as He loves us.

***“And so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”
(verse 10)***

If we love the way Paul is encouraging us to here, we'll be able to discern how to live a life that is pure (translated in the BLB as *sincere*²⁴) and blameless. As Bible commentator Frank Thielman puts it, "Paul's basic request for the Philippians . . . is that they might express their love in ways that show both a knowledge of how to obey God's will generally, and, more specifically, of how to make moral decisions based on God's will in the give-and-take of everyday living."²⁵ Ben and I are always telling our kids that "words matter," and I think that's partially what Paul is trying to say here. Words overflow from

the health of our heart, so if we're speaking death (unkindness or gossip), it's likely our heart isn't in a good place. But if we are women who speak life (kindness and encouragement) into others, we not only will be sincere—not causing others to stumble—but will overflow with what Paul talks about next in this passage.

“Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (verse 11)

We learn in Galatians 5:22-23 that the fruit given to us by the Spirit results in love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In this passage from Philippians, we're learning what ethical fruit we will bear when we live intentionally and with love. Paul doesn't want us focused on an exterior life of striving and attempting to look good through what we do. No—he's encouraging us to live a fruit-filled life, where God's restoration of our hearts and souls emerges outward into action. If we plant this seed of love into our hearts, the outward fruit will be good works, living the way God calls us to—but because that seed grows from Living Water, it is authentic and sustainable in a way willing ourselves to live rightly never could be. In other words, the fruit described here is rooted from the heart.

As much as we all want to be people who speak life-giving words over others, none of us do it perfectly—or perfectly consistently. We get frustrated by that one passive-aggressive coworker and make snide remarks behind their back. We snap at our children when they move out the door at a snail's pace. We nitpick at our spouses when they don't do things quite the way we wish they would. We get frustrated with our parents, neglect our friends, are impatient with the cashier at the grocery store.

But as we pursue the life that really matters, as we seek for our love to abound more and more, we'll find ourselves being more intentional with our words. We'll find ourselves slower to speak when we're grumpy. We'll see the needs around us more clearly and sense God's prompting about the right words to speak.

Let's commit to being women who speak life. And as we do . . . I think we'll start to see life spring up in new ways in the people around us.



Come to Jesus with a humble heart, asking for His forgiveness for the times you've failed to speak life. He is full of grace, and He knows we simply can't do life well without Him. Ask Him who you need to chat with to apologize for your words—or who you need to reach out to with words of hope and affirmation.

Amen.

