




KAREN EHMAN

WHAT MATTERS MOST



A STUDY OF

PHILIPPIANS



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karen Ehman has possessed a love of studying God's Word since the age of sixteen. She began reading a Bible given to her by the across-the-street country church in rural Michigan where she first heard and responded to the gospel at a youth group event. From there, she graduated from Spring Arbor University, began teaching Bible studies in her home church, and now teaches women at events across the country through her books and Bible studies. She's also involved with online Bible teaching to thousands of women around the world.

Karen is a Proverbs 31 Ministries speaker, a writer for the First 5 Bible study app, and a New York Times best-selling author of twelve books including *Keep It Shut: What to Say, How to Say It, and When to Say Nothing at All*. She has been featured on numerous media outlets including FoxNews.com, Redbook.com, Crosswalk.com, FamilyLife.com, and HomeLife Magazine. Married to her college sweetheart, Todd, and the mother of three, Karen enjoys antique hunting, cheering for the Detroit Tigers, and feeding the many teens and young adults who gather around her kitchen island for a taste of Mama Karen's cooking. Connect with her at karenehman.com or inquire about speaking engagements by visiting proverbs31.org/speakers.

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INTRODUCTION

This world is full of trials, disappointments, temptations, fractured friendships, and financial hardships. Circumstances that threaten to knock the joy right out of us swirl about, sending us into an emotional state of despair. We may regret our past choices, feel pressured in our present situations, or fear what our futures may hold.

When such conditions rattle our souls, where can we go for comfort—to gain a new perspective? We might reach out to a friend for advice. We could pick up our phones to escape reality for a while, diving into the picture-perfect world of social media. We might go for a walk to clear our heads or even flop ourselves on our beds for a nap, hoping we'll wake up with a fresh slate, ready to start all over again.

But none of these options offer a permanent solution. They are only temporary, mind-numbing fixes that soon fizzle, leaving us still wallowing in weariness. There has to be a better way.

And there is. We find it when we flip our Bibles open and make our way to the New Testament Book of Philippians, determined to deeply drink in its life-changing truths about *what matters most*.

This short letter—only one hundred and four verses—makes the audacious claim that despite the difficulties we might face, we can experience true contentment and live in real joy. Paul wrote this letter while a prisoner—most likely in the city of Rome. In fact, he was possibly facing execution for his faith. However, no book in the entire Bible is so filled with deep joy and soul-settled contentment as the letter to the Philippians.

While few of us are in a physical prison, we are, in effect, held prisoner nonetheless by many of the topics touched upon in this book. We feel enslaved to the opinions of others, especially our critics. We are shackled by the chains of comparison that prevent us from experiencing true contentment. Our thought lives are a tangled mass of regret, doubt, worry, and sinful thoughts. Thankfully, Philippians holds the key that will unlock the secret of contentment as we apply the truths taught on its pages.

Okay, go grab a cup of something delicious, and let's plunge into Philippians, discovering the truth about *what matters most*.

Cheering you on in your walk with the Lord,



WEEK 1

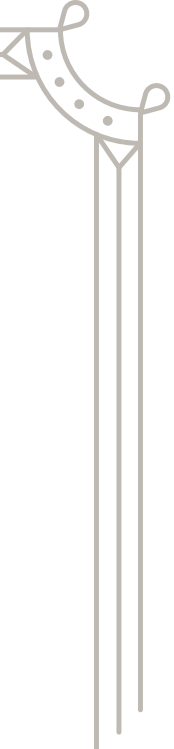
WHAT

MATTERS


MOST

THE GOSPEL

.....



*Now I want you
to know, brothers
and sisters, that
what has happened
to me has actually
advanced
the gospel.*



PHILIPPIANS 1:12



ICEBREAKER

Have you ever become the person you used to make fun of (like what happened with Karen and the bird lady)? Or is there an aspect of your life now that you were certain years ago would never be said of you? Share your thoughts with the group.

1. Which of the two categories of topics that will pop up most often in the Letter of Philippians—relationships and circumstances—do you most need a biblical perspective on? Why?
2. What aspect of the city of Philippi or the beginning of the church there did you most enjoy learning about?
3. In what ways does the “fly over verse” Philippians 1:1 take on a new meaning for you now?
4. The church at Philippi was made up of people who were culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse. What are some practical ways you can reach out and get to know other Christians who do not look like you or live like you?
5. In Philippians 1:3-5, Paul stated he was grateful for his fellow Christians’ “partnership in the gospel.” The original language has financial undertones, implying they used their money and resources to care for each other. When have you financially helped care for another believer or were the recipient of such help? How is this being a partner in the gospel? How does it reflect the salvation story?

6. Paul said that his imprisonment had actually caused the gospel to advance (Phil. 1:12-14). We may not be in a physical prison, but some situations we face might feel like a prison—financial hardship, divorce, wayward children, sickness, or other difficulties. Have you ever seen such a prison—whether in your own life or in the life of another—actually serve as an avenue to advance the gospel? Explain.

ON YOUR OWN

Are you currently facing a situation where you are tempted to cry, Lord, get me out of here? How might the script flip if instead you asked, Father, why have You brought me here? Take a few moments to write out a brief prayer about this situation and the attitude adjustment you long for.

PRAYER TIME

End your time together by taking prayer requests related to the topics in this week’s session. Call on one person to pray for your group. May God grow your faith as you begin this study of *What Matters Most*.



INTRODUCTION

I'm somewhat of an old soul. Although I love to keep up with what is happening in culture and try to understand the latest technology, there is something about all things old-fashioned that I crave and adore. An antique farm table. An old market basket sitting on that old farm table. And to top it off? A nearly one hundred-year-old book nestled in the basket ready to be read by a curious mind longing to slow down, lean in, and learn from its ancient words.

I collect such timeworn books (along with some of the period furniture and retro baskets too). One day while curled up on the sofa with such a book, a section of typeset letters leapt off the page at me. I'd just wiped the dust from the olive green cloth board cover of this volume—an exposition on the Book of Philippians written by a pastor and professor at Princeton. When I carefully turned the yellowing pages to the foreword, my eyes fell on this poetic passage:

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PHILIPPI

"Here is a 'hymn of joy.' At least the composition is pitched to that high key. The music is the more appealing because its accompaniment sounds the notes of privation and loneliness and poverty and pain.

The lines are penned by a prisoner. They are designed to express his gratitude to the friends whose gift has brought relief. More fully do they reveal his conscious relationship to a divine Lord.

The service of Christ is the very sphere of his life;

the spirit of Christ is the temper of his mind;

the perfection of Christ is the goal of his effort;

the power of Christ is the secret of his triumph.

His artless unfolding of personal experience points every reader to the one pathway of peace and strength and unfailing gladness.

Here one can learn to sing songs in the night." —Pastor Charles R. Erdman¹

How I love the picture painted in those words!

Here one can learn to sing songs in the night.

Paul, the imprisoned author of this letter to the infant church at Philippi, had many reasons to despair. He wrote of having been deserted by most of his friends. Others—even fellow Christian leaders—had spoken out against him, hoping to get him into trouble with the ruling government. In fact, Paul was possibly facing execution for his faith. However, no book in the Bible is so filled with deep joy as the Book of Philippians.

What was Paul's secret? How in the world—literally in this human world in which our bodies dwell—could he find the strength not only to be content with his circumstances, but to fix his thoughts on heaven and walk in authentic joy? How could he learn to sing songs in the night?

This letter, written not one hundred years ago but almost two thousand years ago, contains the mysterious musical score that will enable us today to sing such songs in the night. We'll be able to belt out these melodies as we discover what Paul's words and life fleshed out: **When we understand what matters most, we can experience joy no matter what.**

Are you ready? Snuggle up in your own special spot—whether a nostalgic couch, a trendy table at a coffee house, an office cubicle, or a rustic bench in the park. Together let's learn *what matters most*.



READ IT CAREFULLY

This week we will focus on Philippians 1:1-19. Begin by reading these verses through in one sitting or at least over the course of one day. Once you have finished, go back and read them again slowly. As you do, note the verses that jump out at you and why. Do you have a question about a particular verse or portion of Scripture? Does the section encourage you as you face a current situation? Does it convict or challenge you? Record the verses that stand out as well as your reasons for choosing them in the space provided.

VERSE/VERSES	REASON IT STANDS OUT

Now, go back and place a star beside the verse that most encouraged or challenged you in the text. Then put a question mark beside the one that most puzzled you.

The Book of Philippians covers many topics. Let's keep a running list of these matters as we read through the text each week. In the space that follows, jot down any topics covered in the first nineteen verses of chapter one along with the corresponding verse(s) where you found the topic. To help get you started, I've already noted a few.

TOPIC	VERSE WHERE IT IS FOUND
<i>Thankfulness for Christian friends</i>	<i>Verse 3</i>
<i>Joyful prayer for believing friends</i>	<i>Verse 4</i>
<i>Confidence in Christ's continuing good work in us</i>	<i>Verse 5-6</i>

Now that you have read these verses carefully,
answer the following questions:

Did you discover anything new in this passage you had not noticed in
the Bible before? If so, record it here.

Did you spy an old familiar verse in this passage anywhere?
If so, which one?

Did you notice any interesting topic covered in this passage you
didn't know the Bible covered? If so, what topic?

Great job! Now, spend a moment or two praying that God will help your mind to dwell
on these verses over the next week. Also pray that He will enlighten your study as we dive
deeper into these verses in the next section.

STUDY IT PRAYERFULLY



In the last section, you carefully read this week's passage, took note of any verses that specifically challenged or puzzled you, and jotted down the different topics covered in this first chunk of the letter to the Philippians. Time now to drill down a little deeper.

ON SERVANTS AND SAINTS

In the first verse of chapter one, how are Paul and Timothy described?

The original Greek word that is translated in our English Bibles as “servant,” “bond servant,” or “slave” is the word *doulos*. In Paul's day, there were three ways a person could become a *doulos* or slave/servant. They could be born slaves. Any child whose birth parents were slaves was automatically deemed a slave as well. Secondly, a person could become a slave by conquest when—in a war between two countries or tribes—the victorious army captured the people of the defeated side and forced them into involuntary servanthood. And finally, a person could become a slave due to debt. People in poverty sometimes sold themselves or their offspring into slavery in order to pay off a debt they had incurred.

Paul describes himself and his companion Timothy as “servants of Christ.” We must not skip over this verse without thinking about the importance we might unearth from it.

An old song from my teenage years by musician Bob Dylan argues that in life you are going to have to serve somebody. “Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody.”² And you know what? This notion isn't just a catchy, classic rock tune. It is a rock-solid, scriptural truth.

We are born sinners. Sin rules over us. Sin conquers us. We can easily see parallels between our being slaves to sin and slavery in biblical times. There were a few ways that slaves could be released from bondage. They could purchase their freedom for a price, if they possessed enough money. Or if they didn't have the money, their freedom could be granted if someone else was able to pay the cost required for their redemption. Or they could earn their freedom by working off their debt over a set period of time, usually several years. And of course, death brought an end to their slavery when they passed from this life into the next.

In contrast, our slavery to sin can only be remedied one way: through Jesus. He is the One who purchased our freedom through His sacrificial death, guaranteeing that we could be freed from the bondage of sin once and for all. We cannot earn our salvation. Jesus already earned it for us and offers it to us freely.

Paul showcases this powerful truth, which affects how you read verse 1. We are no longer slaves to sin. We are servants of Christ.

Also in verse 1, Paul refers to all the believers in Philippi by what word?

When we think of the word *saint*, a particularly holy person from the past might pop into our minds. But the Greek word for *saint* does not mean a perfectly-behaved person who never sins. It refers to someone who has been consecrated or set apart. That's us. As Christians, we have been set apart by God through Christ in order to carry out the work of the church here on earth. We are chosen, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation," a people belonging to God (1 Pet. 2:9). Another rendition of this word means *different*. Christians are supposed to be different from the rest of the world.

When you think of our current culture, in what ways are we supposed to be different or set apart from others who do not claim to know Christ? List specific ways of thinking or behaving. Be sure these aren't just your opinions of certain activities or behaviors but are actually tethered to what we read in the Bible.

Are any of these particularly difficult for you to do? If so, why? Write a prayer asking God to help you to be set apart and different in your thinking and actions.

INCLUSIVE GREETING

Writing handwritten letters is an art that has all but fallen by the wayside. Today we type out emails, tap out texts, or send people private messages on social media. Usually, we dive right into the subject matter at hand. But the old-fashioned letter was a communication tool that began with a heartfelt and heartwarming greeting. (I can still remember having to write out various possible “salutations” to begin a friendly letter in my 7th grade English class.)

The letter to the Philippians starts in this way. In verse 2, Paul uses two specific, heartwarming words in his greeting. Fill them in below.

_____ to you and _____ from God
our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look up the words *grace* and *peace* in a dictionary, and write out their definitions below.

Grace:

Peace:

In the culture of Paul’s day, *grace* was usually used in a greeting to Gentiles. The Greek word for *grace* is *charis*. It means joy, pleasure, beauty, and brightness. It is even connected to our English word *charm*. The beauty of grace in Christ is that we are born into a relationship with our loving Father. It is not earned. It is a gift. And because of this gift we are no longer under the law but under His loving grace.

Peace on the other hand was used when addressing a Jewish audience. The original word is *eirēnē*. This type of peace isn’t just one that is void of trouble. It means complete and total well-being.

It is interesting that Paul uses both of these common words of salutation—one meant for Greeks, one meant for Jews—in the opening of his communication to the Philippian church. This church was made up of both types of people. We’re given some insight into the church membership in Acts 16. It was thought that there was no synagogue in the

city, so Jews met together down at the river's shore to worship. In the Book of Acts, we see Paul speaking with Lydia, "a dealer in purple cloth" and convert to Judaism who was at the river (Acts 16:14). The origin of the church of Philippi can be traced to his meeting with her that day as she responded to the gospel and was baptized along with the members of her household. Paul and his companions then stayed with her for a time.

Following Paul's encounter with Lydia, he cast a demon out of a slave girl. This resulted in Paul's and Silas's imprisonment, which led to the salvation of the Philippian jailer and his family (Acts 16:16-34). These three key people—Lydia, the slave girl, and the prison guard—were quite possibly the first converts in the city of Philippi, and they couldn't be more different! Lydia was a wealthy woman from Asia. The slave girl was poverty-stricken and Greek. The jailer was a middle-class Philippian. **This shows us that the gospel is for everyone.**

Additionally, the city of Philippi was full of non-Jews; thus the church would also have many such people in its congregation. There were populations of both Greeks and Romans and, although Latin was the official language, most people spoke Greek. By using both the words *grace* and *peace* in his opening greeting, Paul was subtly saying what is overtly said elsewhere in Scripture: "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Today, if you were penning a letter to an infant church, think of the different types of people that might be in its ranks. What would be an inclusive greeting you might write to them? Jot it out.

CHRISTIAN CAMARADERIE

Do you have any Christian friends who are more like siblings to you? Because you share a common faith, your friendship runs deep. You have forged a strong bond with them over the years as together you each have grown in your walks with the Lord. Such friends are crucial. Helpful. Encouraging. And usually, lifelong.

In verses 3-7, Paul gives thanks to God for his Christian friends in the church at Philippi. He uses phrases like "partnership in the gospel," "I have you in my heart," and "partners with me in grace." Think about your own close Christian friends for a moment.

In what ways do you feel a partnership with them?

Does the phrase “I have you in my heart” resonate with you when you think about your friends who are believers (v.7)? If so, how?

Just how important is it to have close Christian friends? Look up the following verses, and jot down your thoughts about the truth found in each passage.

Proverbs 11:14

Proverbs 13:20

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

John 15:12-13

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Think of a close Christian friend. Got that person in mind? Good. Now, using Philippians 1:9-11 as your template, craft a prayer for them. You may even wish to jot them a handwritten note with your prayer to encourage them spiritually and brighten their day.

*Is any
pleasure on
earth as great
as a circle
of Christian
friends by
a good fire?*

C. S. LEWIS³

In verses 12-19, Paul speaks of his imprisonment. He is in physical confinement, held captive. However, he does not allow his chains to shackle him spiritually. Look at these verses again, and then answer the following questions.

How has Paul's imprisonment affected his sharing of the gospel?

How has his boldness affected the boldness of others?

In verses 15-18, what shows that the proclamation of the gospel is the priority to Paul?

Today we may not be in an actual brick and bars prison, but there are many things that seek to hold us captive.

Has something ever gripped you that actually turned out to be beneficial because it enabled you to encourage and strengthen someone's spiritual growth? Explain.

Has a situation or circumstance held you prisoner but God used it to share the gospel with others? Explain.

LIVE IT OUT PRACTICALLY



We've covered many topics through this week's passage. We have explored what it means to be servants of Christ. We've unearthed the real meaning of the word *saint*. We've talked about grace, peace, and true Christian friendship. And most of all, we have explored the concept of how the gospel can be advanced despite our difficult circumstances. It's time now for living out what we have learned.

AN OUTWARD SYMBOL OF AN INWARD ATTITUDE

I don't have a ton of jewelry. Of course, I have a few pieces I treasure, such as my wedding ring, another ring my husband gave me on our twenty-fifth anniversary, and a necklace with all of my children's names engraved on it. I also have the gold watch my mother gave me when I turned twenty-one. And, yes, I still have in my possession my high school class ring, complete with my birthstone in it and my initials on the side.

Beyond that, I only have one other treasured piece of jewelry. It is a simple silver toe ring. Yes. A toe ring. Let me explain.

In the Old Testament, if a slave loved his master and chose to stay with him even after his time of servitude was completed, the master would pierce the slave's ear. This was an outward symbol of loyalty and lifetime commitment to his master (Ex. 21:1-6; Deut. 15:12-17). I decided I wanted something to remind me that I am a servant of Christ and eternally belong to Him. I already had pierced ears, so I needed something else I could feel and see with my own eyes without looking in the mirror. I chose to start wearing a sterling silver toe ring.

I don this piece of jewelry to remind me that **I am a slave of Christ. Therefore, my thoughts, words, and actions should be in alignment with His will.** There've been times when I started to behave badly or use my words wrongly, such as lashing out in anger at a loved one, but then spied the ring on my left foot (or, in the winter, saw the identical thumb ring I wear instead). It's a stark reminder: I am a servant of Christ. Am I acting like one?

Yes, in reality—legally—I am free. I live in a country where I am allowed to do as I like as long as I don't break the laws of the land. However, my toe ring reminds me of this verse:

*Live as free people, but do not use your freedom
as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.*

1 PETER 2:16, NIV

In our Christian culture, too often we use our freedom as a cover-up for evil. No longer is it common for us to view God with respect, standing in awe of His holiness with a healthy fear (reverence) of Him. We have dumbed down God. Made Him our pal. Our buddy. Our assistant who will fetch us anything we desire—well, as long as we ask politely. Instead of us being servants of Christ, we think He is meant to serve us, to grant our wishes, and make our lives comfortable and difficulty-free.

This backward view of our relationships and roles with God is wrong and evil.

For a proper understanding of our place—and God’s—look up the following verses, and record what they say about God (and His ability).

Exodus 15:6

Psalms 66:5-7

Isaiah 26:4

Jeremiah 10:12-13

Zephaniah 3:17

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now, in a brief paragraph, describe who God is and who we are as humans in relation to Him.

How does seeing and recording this perspective change your thoughts about God? Have you ever thought of Him as your servant or your wish-granter? Explain. What changes will you make in your thoughts and language toward and about God now that you better understand the truth about who He is and who we are?

On that topic, review our discussion of slavery during Paul's day (p. 15). How does that explanation help you understand your relationship with Christ?

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being *never* and 10 being *always*, how often would you say you think of yourself as a slave of Jesus?

Never

Always

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How would you like to see that number change?

Perhaps you will want to score your own bangle or bracelet to remind you that you belong to Christ!

CHALLENGE OF THE WEEK

If you want even more opportunity to put into practice the truths you've learned in this session, choose to complete one of the following challenges. Be ready to share the results of your challenge with your group.

- 1. WRITE A LETTER.** Write a handwritten letter to a close Christian friend expressing what His or her friendship means to you and how it has helped you in your walk with Christ. Start your letter by quoting Philippians 1:3-6, "I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you, always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Pop it in the mail, and send it off with a prayer.
- 2. DIVERSIFY YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.** The Philippian church was diverse, containing both Jews and non-Jews, as well as people of different social status. Do all your friends look and live just like you? Think of someone who is of a different race, nationality, or economic level than you. Invite them out for coffee to get to know them better, and share the love of Christ with them.
- 3. WRITE YOUR TESTIMONY.** Paul saw his chains as an opportunity to spread the gospel. Has something happened in your life that has placed you in bondage? Can you see Christ and the gospel even in the midst of this sorrowful or painful circumstance? If so, write your testimony of the way God met you in the situation and how the gospel can help others who struggle with such situations. First Peter 3:15-16a urges us: "... in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and respect ..." By having your testimony written out, you'll be ready to give the reason for your hope when someone asks. (Then, pray that they will ask!)



MEMORY VERSE

OPTIONAL MEMORY VERSE

There will be optional memory work provided each week to further internalize the message of the passages we study together. To support you in this endeavor, all six passages are printed in the back of the study guide. Feel free to photocopy those pages on paper or card stock, and then cut the verses out. If you are the crafty sort, you could layer the verses on top of some decorative scrapbooking paper.



Keep them in a convenient location—like your vehicle, purse, or laptop bag. You can practice memorizing them while waiting—in the dentist’s office, carpool line, or at the Department of Motor Vehicles. (*You could probably memorize the whole Book of Philippians during your wait there!*) Or, you might decide to post them at your kitchen sink or tape them up on your bathroom mirror where you will see them each day. Laminate them with clear contact paper to prevent them from getting splashed.

You may want to see if someone else in your group would like to come early or stay a few minutes after your group time so the two of you can practice saying the verses out loud to each other.


We’ll start out with a sweet and simple verse to remind us that our struggles can be used for God’s purposes.

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually advanced the gospel.

PHILIPPIANS 1:12



*Now I want you
to know, brothers
and sisters, that
what has happened
to me has actually
advanced the
gospel.*



PHILIPPIANS 1:12