

INTRODUCTORY SESSION



These pages contain an outline for an optional introductory session to use before you start Week 1 of the Bible study. The final two pages can be copied to give to your group as handouts.

This session is designed to help your group in two areas:

- 1** *Understanding the context into which the letter of Philippians was written.*
- 2** *Giving some basic principles for reading a New Testament letter.*

Introduction

Begin your time together with some get to know you questions. Below are two suggestions:

- **Why have you joined our Discipleship Explored group?**
- **We are going to study Philippians together. What are you hoping to learn?**

Pray for your group as you begin the session.

Explain that we are going to do three things:

- 1** *Look at the background of Philippians.*
- 2** *Discuss some general principles for reading New Testament letters.*
- 3** *Read the whole letter (explain that it's a short letter so it won't take too long).*

The background of Philippians

Begin by asking: Does anyone know where Philippi is?

Give out the handouts for this session and explain that Philippi is located in the north of modern day Greece (see map on handout).

Next explain:

When you read a New Testament letter, it is good to work out who the letter was written to and what the church was like. The book of Acts tells the story of the early church (the first Christians). In Acts 16:11-40 we can read about how the church in Philippi started. Lets read the passage together and see what we can learn about the church that Paul was writing to.

Read Acts 16:11-40

Use the word definitions opposite as needed for your group.

Bible words

v13 Sabbath. Jewish day of worship, Saturday.

v13 gathered. Brought together.

v15 baptized. Publicly declared their faith by being immersed in water as a symbol that Jesus has wiped their sin away and given them new life.

v15 persuaded. Convinced.

v16 slave. A person who is legally owned by another person and is forced to work for them.

v16 predicted. Told what would happen in the future.

v16 fortune-telling. Telling people what will happen in the future using supernatural powers.

v20 magistrate. A person who judges less serious cases in a local court.

v20 Throwing our city into a uproar. Making the people in our city angry and disruptive.

v21 advocating. Encouraging people to take on customs that are new or different.

v21 customs. Accepted ways of behaving or of doing things in a society.

v22 to be stripped. To have their clothes taken off by force.

v22 beaten. Hit.

v23 flogged. Punished by being hit many times with a stick or whip.

v24 cell. Prison room.

v24 Stocks. Structure with holes for the feet, used to lock criminals.

v25 hymns. Songs of worship.

v26 foundations. Solid material on which a building is built.

v27 escaped. Got away from the prison.

v29 trembling. Shaking with fear.

Read Acts 16:11-40 again

1 What do we know about Philippi? (verses 11-12)

- *Capital city of Macedonia*
- *Roman colony – its citizens were Roman citizens*
- *It was a rich city, on a main trade route – we know this because Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth.*

2 Who started the church in Philippi? (see verses 6 & 11)

- *Paul and his companions.*

3 Who were the first Christians in Philippi? And how did they become Christians?

- *A group of God-fearing women (Lydia and her household) Paul and his friends spoke to them, and they believed and were baptised*
- *Probably a slave girl (although the passage does not tell us if she became a*

Christian). The slave girl was able to predict the future because of an evil spirit in her. She kept telling everyone who Paul and his friends were and what they were trying to do (tell people how to be saved). Paul sent the evil spirit out of her. Her owners very angry as they could no longer make money from her.

- *Jailer and his household. Paul and his friends were in jail. There was an earthquake, the doors opened and their chains fell off. The jailer went to kill himself because he knew he would be in so much trouble if his prisoners escaped. Paul stopped him from killing himself. The jailer asked how he could be saved. Paul told him: "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved". Paul taught the jailer and his household. They all believed and were baptised.*

4 How long did Paul stay in Philippi?

Long enough to care for the people deeply but not very long as he and his friends were chased out of the city.

5 What would it have been like to be a Christian in Philippi?

- *Exciting because so many amazing things had happened.*
- *Scary because they knew that their faith might lead to oppression and persecution.*

How to read a letter

Explain that in different cultures we have different rules for writing letters.

In Britain we structure a letter like this:

- 1 First you find the address of the writer
- 2 Then the date the letter was written
- 3 Then who the letter was written to
- 4 Next a greeting
- 5 Then the main body of the letter
- 6 Followed by who the letter was written by

(Use the example in the handout, and opposite, to illustrate these points.)

A British letter:

Address

10 January 09

Dearest Mary,

Hello. How are you?

[illegible]

Love,

Daddy

Next explain that New Testament letters have a different structure. Illustrate this from the example in the handout (and below).

- 1 Name of writer
- 2 Description of the writer
- 3 Who the letter is to
- 4 Greetings
- 5 The main body of the letter

A letter when Philippians was written:

Daddy, who loves you and wants the best for you,

To Mary, my beloved youngest daughter,

Grace and peace to you.

[illegible]

Read Philippians 1:1-2

1 Who wrote the letter?

Paul & Timothy

2 How are they described?

Servants of Christ Jesus

3 Who is the letter to?

“All the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons”

All the Christians and their leaders in Philippi.

4 What greeting is given?

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

How to read a Bible letter

This section is about how to read letters. First we will think about how to read a normal letter. What process do you go through? Then we will think about the difference between reading a letter written to you and reading a letter written to someone else in a different time and culture. The aim of this section is to help people think about principles for reading a Bible letter.

1 How do you normally read a letter?

Note: you might want to bring a letter to demonstrate

Open the envelope. Check who it is from. Read the whole letter quickly.

Then go back and re-read it looking at what was written in particular parts.

2 How should we read a Bible letter?

The same way.

Read the whole letter before you read random verses.

You must read verses in context of the whole letter and of each paragraph.

3 What is the difference between reading a letter written to you and a letter written to someone else many years ago in a different culture?

We don't know the whole story. We are only reading one side.

It is harder to understand because we don't know the people or the situation. You have to be like a detective...

Look at a sample together. Read the letter below.

3 Hill Street, Shipley, Yorkshire

20 November 2004

Dearest Mary,

Your mother and I were so glad to hear that you've settled down well in London and have begun to make friends there. It's good you're having so much fun. However, please don't neglect your studies, but study hard for your exams.

Remember not to start exercising. I know you miss jogging, but if you don't let your ankle heal properly, it may never get well completely. Be patient.

Lastly, try not to go out alone after 5pm. The streets may be dangerous.

Love, Daddy

Someone might read this letter and decide to write a book called:

How to behave in cities – a textbook for all people everywhere

It might make the points :

1 Study hard

2 Don't exercise

3 Don't go out after 5pm

The problem is this is NOT the correct way to understand what was written. We cannot ignore the situation the letter was written into.

Explain that:

1 Reading a Bible letter is like listening to one side of a telephone conversation.

• *We only hear half the conversation.*

2 We need to understand the situation behind the letter.

• *What problems are being addressed?*

• *We need to be detectives, trying to put the pieces of information together.*

3 We need to understand the historical context.

- *What is the situation? How similar or different is it to us today?*
- *Look in the letter itself for clues.*
- *Look in the book of Acts.*
- *Ask an expert or read more about it from a commentary.*

4 Don't forget what type of literature you are reading.

- *Letters need to be read from start to finish and then in paragraphs.*
- *Try to understand the logic of the writer. What was his purpose in writing? E.g. the request for Mary not to exercise was because of her hurt ankle.*

Reading the letter to the Philippians

You could choose to do the exercise below as a group or encourage the students to do it at home. Note: do not worry if your group don't get all the answers below as they will have time to do this during the course.

Read Philippians 1:1 – 4:23

Read the whole letter to the Philippians in your own language.

1 What was the situation? What do we learn about the church in Philippi?

Epaphroditus (a member of the church in Philippi) was sent to Paul with a gift from the church. He stayed with Paul to help him in his life and ministry in prison.

Paul is sending Epaphroditus home because he was so sick that he almost died. Paul sends this letter with him to encourage the church and teach them about some key issues they were dealing with as a church.

2 What issues did Paul raise?

- *His gratefulness for their partnership in the gospel.*
- *His own situation and Epaphroditus' situation.*
- *Learning how to be united and stand firm in their faith, especially in a context of opposition and suffering.*
- *Learning to follow Jesus' example: humility and self-sacrifice.*
- *Warning against false teaching.*
- *Encouragements and greetings.*

End your time together by praying with or for your group.

INTRODUCTORY SESSION HANDOUT



Where is Philippi?



Read Acts 16:11-40

Are there any words you do not understand?

Look at the Bible words list on the next page to help you.

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