



Reading New Testament Letters (Epistles)¹

Overview:

This series will focus on how we got the Bible, why we can trust it, and what's most important as we study, interpret, and apply what we read. While the sermon series will be topical in nature, our weekly discussion and reflection guides will each center around a genre of scripture. As you learn about each genre, we'll provide sample texts that illustrate some of the uniquenesses about that genre. We hope this study helps you go deeper in your bible study skills and provides helpful context and application for the broader topics in the sermons.

Group Objectives:

Relationships and Life Transformation are the primary purpose of community groups.

- Reflect on this week's texts and other devotional reading.
- Pray together and provide encouragement for other group members.
- Explore the meaning of "being likeminded" (Philippians 2:2). As a church how do we become likeminded with one another?

DNA statement(s) tie-in:

- *We encounter the Father daily.* God the Father speaks to us through the Bible, and we commune with him through prayer.

Conversation Starters:

- What made you laugh this week?
- If you could have any superpower, what would it be? Why?
- What stood out to you from this week's sermon?

Listening to God

- Where did you see God at work last week? In your life? Or the world around you?
- How do you best connect with God? (Scripture, prayer, silence, solitude, etc)

¹ This discussion guide was written by Reagan Bergen and edited by Dawn Gentry.

Learning about God’s Word: New Testament Letters (Epistles)

Of the 27 New Testament books, 21 of them are letters. Most consist of the name of both writer and recipient; greetings and a prayer wish; the content of the letter; and a transition to closing (which often included greetings to specific people). Some are private, person to person missives (Philemon); others are more formal and literary (Romans); others still fall somewhere between (Ephesians/Philippians).

While they seem straightforward, most are written in response to address specific problems or questions, about which we have little context or understanding. Care should be taken to assess the historical context of these “occasional documents” since they arise from, and are intended to address, situations in the first century. The best way to read an epistle is from front to back, again and again, to get a feel for the **entire document** and its themes, **before** trying to interpret individual verses. Additionally, reading a letter **aloud** is a great way to experience it the way Christians in the early church did. You may hear something you never noticed before.

Learning from God’s Word: Bible Study Discussion

In his letter to the Philippian church, the Apostle Paul writes from a Roman prison to thank them for a gift they had sent and encourage them in their faith. Philippi was a heavily pagan and spiritually pluralistic society; the population at large worshipped many gods and spirits, including the Roman emperor and his family.² Those who abstained from imperial worship would have been seen as subversive toward the Roman state, resulting in persecution. In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul calls on the church to seek unity and like-mindedness through humility and servitude. Because the church had experienced the benefits of knowing Christ, Paul challenges them to strive toward further oneness with each other, to overcome division and withstand the persecution they faced. Such unity can only be achieved when a church shifts its perspective to embody the humility of Christ. We, too, are called to unity, servanthood, and humility in our relationships with one another—as followers of Jesus who humbled himself to the Father to reveal God’s redemptive plan for the world.

- **Read Philippians 2:1-4**
 - What stood out to you from this text?
 - As believers, what are some benefits of a relationship with Christ? (see verse 1).
 - Why is it important that we aren’t just consumers of these benefits, but also servants to others?
 - What do you think it means for us to be “likeminded” as a church?
 - How can we value others above ourselves?

- **Read Philippians 2:5-11**
 - Paul points to Jesus as being the supreme example of servanthood and humility.
 - What do servanthood and humility look like for you in your personal context?
 - When Jesus came to earth, he chose not to have the power or prestige of the rulers of his day. Instead, Jesus came as a servant, not a military or political leader (Isaiah 53:2-3).
 - What does this tell us about the character of God?
 - Jesus came to this earth fully man and fully God. However, he opted not to display his full divinity while on earth to identify with those he came to save. He humbled himself “by taking the very nature of a servant” (vs 7) and on earth, depended on God’s Spirit, even as we do. How does Jesus’ humanity impact your relationship with him? (c.f. Hebrews 4:15)

² Hansen, G. W. *The Letter to the Philippians*. Eerdmans. (2009), 3.

Leaning into Obedience:

- The next time you find yourself disagreeing with someone, instead of jumping to conclusions, hear the person out. Listen to understand, instead of listening to reply.
- Servanthood and humility are “kingdom normal” in God’s kingdom. What is something you can do this next week to serve someone else?
- Ask someone from CCC who you don’t know very well to get coffee or lunch in the coming week.

Prayer Prompts:

- Invite members of the group to share requests.
- Pair up with another person or get into groups of three to pray for one another.
- In addition to your prayer requests, pray for unity, humility, and like-mindedness.

For further study:

- See our online resource, a *Reading Guide on Ephesians*, to go deeper studying another example of the New Testament Epistles.
- N. T. Wright., *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*. (Westminster: John Knox). 2015.
- Bible Project videos
 - <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/new-testament-letters-literary-context/>
 - <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/new-testament-letters-epistles-historical-context/>
 - <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/philippians/>