

Paul & the Philippians

A Bible Study in the Dynamics of Biblical Change

By David Powlison

Read Acts 16:6-40 and Philippians 1-4

Read through Acts 16 and Philippians closely. This study will not proceed verse by verse. Instead it asks questions of all five chapters at once. For example “Notice Paul’s situation? What are all the varied pressures Paul faces?” and “What do you see and hear about God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?”

As you gain familiarity with the flow of Acts 16 and Philippians, you can skim more quickly through to assemble your answer to each question. For example, these chapters describe more than a dozen different hardships that Paul faced. Your job is to put yourself in his shoes and notice them. You will see that each question is put several ways. Don’t necessarily answer every sub-question. Various ways of putting the same basic question help you to look intently at what the Bible is saying.

The study will work through materials familiar to you from the Dynamics of Biblical Change course: the “three trees,” the “eight questions.” The goal is to help you notice things, organize things, sort out things that differ, think clearly and carefully. This study is meant to change the way you think, act, and experience life. It is then meant to change the way you help others.

How can you involve others both in your Scripture study and the self-counseling project? Discussion, accountability, and prayer can greatly contribute to converting ideas into life wisdom.

These same questions can be easily adapted to other books of the Bible, for they are simply a tool to get you to notice what the Bible says to PEOPLE in real-life SITUATIONS before GOD. For example, you could look at 1 Peter, refocusing Question 1 into “Notice particulars of the readers’ situation.” For example, you could study Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, refocusing Questions 3 and 8 into “What consequences – vicious or gracious circle – do you observe in the stories of people’s lives?”

[1] Notice Paul’s situation, all that is swirling around him, both “negative” and “positive.”

What are the varied pressures Paul faces? Put yourself in Paul’s shoes. What are Paul’s hardships? What burdens, temptations, stresses, problems, failures, impotencies, threats and pains – actual and potential – does Paul face? How are his circumstances difficult? How are people sinning against Paul?

What are the “positive” parts of Paul’s situation? What successes, triumphs, vindications and blessings does Paul experience? What positive impact is he having on events and people? How are people responding favorably to him and his efforts? What is God doing around him and through him?

[2] Think about the typical reactions to such circumstances.

Brainstorm: how do you – or people in general – tend to react to the kinds of pressures Paul was under? What is life like when these things weigh on you? How do you typically react: thoughts? Words? Attitudes? Emotions? Actions? What temptations would you face in such circumstance? In other words, what does Paul command the Philippians not to do? How do you – or people in general –tend to react when good things happen? What temptations come when life abound with good things, when everything’s going your way? How do you typically react: thought? Words? Attitudes? Emotions? Actions? What problem attitudes and actions can arise when you receive success and blessings?

[3] Dig for the craving and beliefs that tend to rule the human heart, producing ungodly reactions.

What do Acts 16 and Philippians say, demonstrate, or imply about why people tend to react in ways quite different from Paul? What beliefs and desires control reactions? What controls the interpretation of experience? What motivates the reaction? For example, Philippians 1:17f, 1:28, 2:3f, 2:21, 3:3-7, 3:19, 4:6, and 4:12 and Acts 16:16, 16:19, and 16:27 directly describe some of the false masters that create bad fruit in our lives. Other times more subtle connections are drawn. For example, Philippians 2:12, 13, 15 have implications regarding the causes that underlie “grumbling and disputing” in 2:14. How do particular sins flow directly from these motives? For example, how might grumbling or anger or worry or compulsive eating or manipulating others flow from the “god” and “mindset” Philippians 3:19 describes? Draw specific links, and explain the logic of the link.

Why don’t positive experiences, behavioral reformation and positive thinking really change us? What happens when people experience blessings without dealing with their heart’s motives? When people try to change their feelings directly, without addressing reigning desires and beliefs? When people try to act righteously and lovingly, without dealing with the motives that underlie behavior? When people try to discipline their minds by positive thinking, without changing what rules them?

[4] What are the consequences of instinctive sinful reactions?

What “vicious circles” do you see threatening the Philippians? What negative consequences might arise from sin? How would bad reactions compound hardships or create new problems or spoil blessings? What do you reap when you respond to circumstances by

instinct? What possible consequences can you envision if Paul had reacted out of the flesh to the rigors of itinerant life, to the honor of apostleship, to being jailed, to the jailer's conversion, to Epaphroditus's illness, to the sins of Euodia & Syntyche, to poverty and riches, etc.?

[5] Notice what changes lives, inside and out.

What specifically does God reveal of Himself *in Philippians*? Who is He? What is He like? What does He promise? How does He work? What has He done? What do you see Him doing? What will He do? What truth do you see and hear about the God who is your true environment? What is the power at work within you?

Philippians does not reveal everything about God, but several well-chosen things. What particular needs are addressed by what God chooses to promise and to reveal of Himself? What resources are tailored to the struggle between sin and godliness? What resources are brought to bear on the particular hardships of the situation?

How does God work through other people? You don't understand God in a vacuum. You don't grow to change in isolation. How do Acts 16 and Philippians portray godly people influencing and helping one another grow in faith and obedience? How do you see Paul acting? What impact do the lives of Timothy and Epaphroditus have?

[6] What rules the heart in godly responders?

What rules Paul? How is Paul's life determined by faith? What do Acts 16 and Philippians tell or imply about why Paul responds in such an unusual, "unnatural" way to the things he experiences in life? What ruled Paul? What controlled both his interpretation of circumstances and his response? What is his secret of contentment, the source of his peace, thankfulness and joy? What did Paul believe, trust, fear, hope in, love, seek, obey?

How does faith make the whole world look different? How does faith as a ruling motive reinterpret our circumstances for us, even when we are in the midst of suffering or success?

How does genuine faith change people in practical ways? How does faith change Paul's desires and directly produce Paul's outward responses? For example, how do thankfulness, peacemaking and contentment flow directly from believing, trusting and fearing God in Paul's exact circumstances? Draw the links specifically.

How is turning, repentance, change portrayed? How does faith in God's message enable us to cross the line? How do we move from our natural reactions to a response of faith like Paul's? How do we move

- FROM compulsive self-interest (1:17f, 2:3f & 2:21),
- FROM confidence in ourselves (3:3-7),

- FROM making our desires into our gods (3:19),
- FROM living for what is before our eyes and all around us (3:19),
- FROM preoccupation with our anxieties of comforts or riches (4:6 & 4:12, and Acts 16:19),
- FROM fear of what people will do to us (1:28 and Acts 16:27),
- FROM willing and doing my own good pleasure (2:13-15), and
- TO faith in the living, loving and powerful Savior, Jesus Christ,
- TO willing and doing God's good pleasure?

In other words, what happened to Lydia the Philippian jailer, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and the other Philippian Christians Paul writes to? How is turning to God a once-for-all-act? How is turning to God a daily, ongoing process, a way of life? What happens once for all at conversion is a picture of what happens daily in Christian growth. How do Philippians 1:6, 1:9, 1:14, 1:25, 2:12, 2:15, 3:12-16, 4:2, and 4:12 describe this ongoing process of becoming different? True Christians are "disciple" of Jesus, who are in process (Luke 9:23). What do Euodia and Syntyche need?

[7] Look for the specific good fruit.

How does Paul respond? What does he command readers to do? How does Paul respond to positive and to negative circumstances? How does he interpret his world? How does he act? What does he say, do and feel in the midst of both trials and victories? How does he tell you to respond? What are concrete ways you are told to obey God?

[8] What good effects result from the way Paul handled his situation?

What "gracious circles" does he create? How do Paul, Silas, Timothy and Epaphroditus affect and influence people and events? What positive consequences do you see or can you envision happening because of how Paul handles things? What do you imagine was the impact of obedient Philippians on other people in Philippi? How do faith and obedience affect others and the world around you?

Personal reflection: What have you learned?

Stop and think. Go back and read what you have written in this study of Paul and the Philippians. Think about your walk with God, your self-counseling project, and your ministry to others. What would it be like if/as the message of Philippians became written on your heart, became the way you instinctively processed life? Write a paragraph to a page about what made the biggest impression on you personally as you did this study, and what might have the most significant impact as you make it your own.

EXPLANATION

This is a self-directed Bible study entitled “Paul and the Philippians.” It consists of eight questions that are used to examine the book of Philippians and Acts 16. David’s entire course seeks to flesh out these questions and to explain their biblical and inner logic. Here are the eight questions to ask in seeking the dynamics of biblical sanctification:

1. What is my **situation**? (What was or what will be my situation?)
2. How am I **reacting**? (or How did I react? How will I be tempted to react?)
3. What is **ruling** me? (Desires, expectations, fears, beliefs)
4. What are the **consequences** of my reaction? (Vicious circles)
5. Who is **God**? What does He say? What resources will He provide to help in my need?
6. How can I **turn** to God for help? (Hebrews 4:16)
7. How should I **respond** to the situation in order to honor God?
8. What are the **consequences** of living in faith and obedience? (Gracious circles)

Here is an overview of this inner logic:

Qs 1, 4, & 8 capture the “stage” or situation into which God places us providentially, both the varied circumstances that “come at us” (Q 1), and the situational consequences that result from how we respond (Qs 4 & 8).

Qs 2-3 & 6-7 capture the moral divide in human life, the paths of folly and wisdom respectively. Qs 2 & 7 look at horizontal dimension, how we live; Qs 3 & 6 explore vertical dimension, who we live for.

Q 5 captures the particulars of the living, redeeming God, who is at work in His world.

One of the purposes of the study (as in our lives) is to notice exactly WHAT is revealed about God in any particular situation, based on the challenges to faith and obedience faced by any particular people. God never reveals everything all at once, so even the “normative” revelation is based on particulars of the “situational” and “existential” (to borrow John Frame’s language).

These Qs seek to capture the living dynamic of real people in a real world with a real God.