

Sample Observation Questions – Philippians 1:1-11

When leading a Bible study discussion group, good questions are key to helping others explore the passage through observation. Rather than pointing out your observations to the group, use questions to help them see the facts of the passage.

¹ Paul and Timothy,	Who are the people mentioned?
	What is the order of the names?
bond-servants	How are they described?
of Christ Jesus,	How are they related to Christ? Where are all the places in the passage where Christ is mentioned?
To all	How many times is the word “all” used in this passage?
	Are there other “inclusive” words?
the saints	Who are the recipients?
in Christ Jesus	How are they described? Is this the same description used above for bond-servants?
who are in Philippi,	How specific is his greeting?
including	How does he relate “overseers and deacons” to “saints”?
the overseers and deacons:	Who does Paul single out? What distinction does he make?
² Grace to you	What are his wishes for them?
and peace	In what order does he mention these qualities?
from God	What is the source of these qualities? Where are all the places he mentions God in this passage?
our Father	How does he describe God? Whose God is he talking about?
and the Lord Jesus Christ.	How does he relate Jesus to God? How does he describe Jesus here differently than earlier references?
³ I thank	What is Paul’s action? How does the pronoun relate to the opening verse?
my God	How does he describe God in the context of thanksgiving? How does this relate to the pronoun he used with “Father”?
in all my remembrance of you,	How often does he think of them?
⁴ always offering prayer	How often does he pray for them? How does he describe the activity of prayer?
with joy	What is his attitude in prayer for them?
in my every prayer	How consistent is his prayer for them?
for you all,	Who among them does he pray for?

⁵ in view	What is his motivation for prayer for them?
of your participation	How does he describe their relationship to him and his ministry?
in the gospel	What is the common ground of their participation?
from the first day	How long have they been associated with him and his ministry?
until now.	How dependable has their participation been?
⁶ For I am confident	How sure is Paul of their future?
of this very thing,	How specific is his vision of their future?
that He who began	What is his starting point in his view of their future? What verbs are active, and what verbs are passive in this passage?
a good work in you	How does he describe God's work in their lives?
will perfect it	What does he see as the outcome of God's work in their lives? Who is the active agent?
until	How constant is the process Paul sees for their lives?
the day of Christ Jesus.	When does he see the climax of God's work in their lives?
⁷ For	What are transition words, or explanation words, or cause and effect words in the passage?
it is only right	How does Paul describe the appropriateness of his feelings?
for me to feel	Is Paul's ministry to them just a job?
this way	
about you all,	Who is the focus of his feelings?
because	What is the basis of Paul's feelings for the saints at Philippi?
I have you in my heart,	What indications are there of the depth of his feelings for them?
since	What is the logical sequence indicated by words like "for", "because", "since" in this section?
both in my imprisonment	What is the range of experiences involving the Philippians in Paul's ministry?
and in the defense	What are possible positive and negative aspects of his ministry he recalls?
and confirmation of the gospel,	
you all	Who does he credit with this participation?
are partakers	How deeply were they involved in his ministry?
of grace	What is the common point they shared in his ministry?
with me.	
⁸ For God	
is my witness,	How sure was Paul of his feelings for them?
how I long for you all	How deep were his feelings for them?

with the affection	
of Christ Jesus.	
⁹ And this I pray,	What was Paul's response to his feelings for them?
that your love may abound	What is Paul's prayer for them?
still more and more	How specific was his prayer for them?
in real knowledge	What are the qualities he prays for? What level of "knowledge" and "discernment" did he have in mind for them?
and all discernment,	
¹⁰ so that	What is the overall goal of his prayer for them?
you may approve	What does he want to see happen in their spiritual maturity?
the things that are excellent,	What is the measure of success?
in order	
to be sincere	What is the end result he wants for them?
and blameless	
until the day of Christ;	How far ahead is he thinking about their growth and maturity? Does this sound like anything else in the passage?
¹¹ having been filled	What do the verbs indicate about any sequence of events? What do active and passive verbs indicate about the relationship of events?
with the fruit of righteousness	What does Paul want to fill their lives? How does the preposition relate "fruit" and "righteousness"?
which <i>comes</i> through Jesus Christ,	What are the different prepositions used to describe different parts of this process? What is Jesus' place in this process?
to the glory and praise of God.	What are the results that Paul expects to come out of this process? What is God's place in this process?

General comments on observations:

1. Not every observation will be significant, or lead to some great insight. But you never know until you start looking (and *marking* and *writing!*). Don't be afraid to make trivial observations. They may uncover some key aspect of the passage. Remember Traina's encouragement: "The familiar is made to disclose undreamed treasure." (p. 32)
2. Not every observation from your personal study will be useful in leading a group discussion. Often thorough observation will suggest multiple directions the passage could take in a group discussion. Most likely, the passage will not be exhausted in a single quiet time or a single group meeting. For example, the Philippians 1:1-11 passage could provide great insight about Paul's prayer life, Paul's ministry, an emphasis on the unity in the church at Philippi, an overview of the process of Christian growth, etc. Rather than trying to cover every aspect, the use the observation of the passage to determine which aspect will best address your current personal need or the needs of the particular group.
3. The sample observation questions above follow the sequence of the passage, but asking questions in a different order may be more helpful in you own study or in a group discussion. As you "pound" on the passage like Luther to dig out more and more facts, some of the observations will often group together. The observation of the individual parts may help you fit together broader observations about the passage as a whole (an inductive method, remember?).
4. Observation questions start with what you see in the passage. As you continue in observation of the passage, the facts you discover should help you to understand the passage, especially as you move to interpretation. As God uses the passage in your life, think about "How can I help other people discover this for themselves?" rather than just telling them. "How can I help them 'receive the word with great eagerness' and 'examine the Scriptures' like the Bereans in Acts 17?"
5. Thorough observation is critical for your own personal study, but is especially important if you are leading a group discussion or even sharing the passage with another individual. If you only skim the passage to get ammunition for the point you want to make, you will not be prepared for the really good questions that the other(s) may ask about the passage. Exhaustive observation will give you a better grasp of what is in the passage and better equip you to respond to other questions. Some of those other questions may be tangential "rabbit trails", but some may lead to great, life-changing insights that God wants to use in a discussion that are not what you expected to discuss. Observation of the passage, including the parts that don't at first seem critical to you, is important preparation.
6. These are observation questions. Interpretation questions should be coming to mind as you are doing the observation on the passage. You might want to jot down notes to remind yourself of the question later. But don't abandon observation too soon by getting onto even a really good interpretation tangent. Discipline yourself to exhaustive observation as a prerequisite to effective interpretation. Remember Traina's admonition: "If there is ever a blurring of the process to the extent that the various phases of study become indistinguishable, then eisegesis will inevitably result." (p. 49)