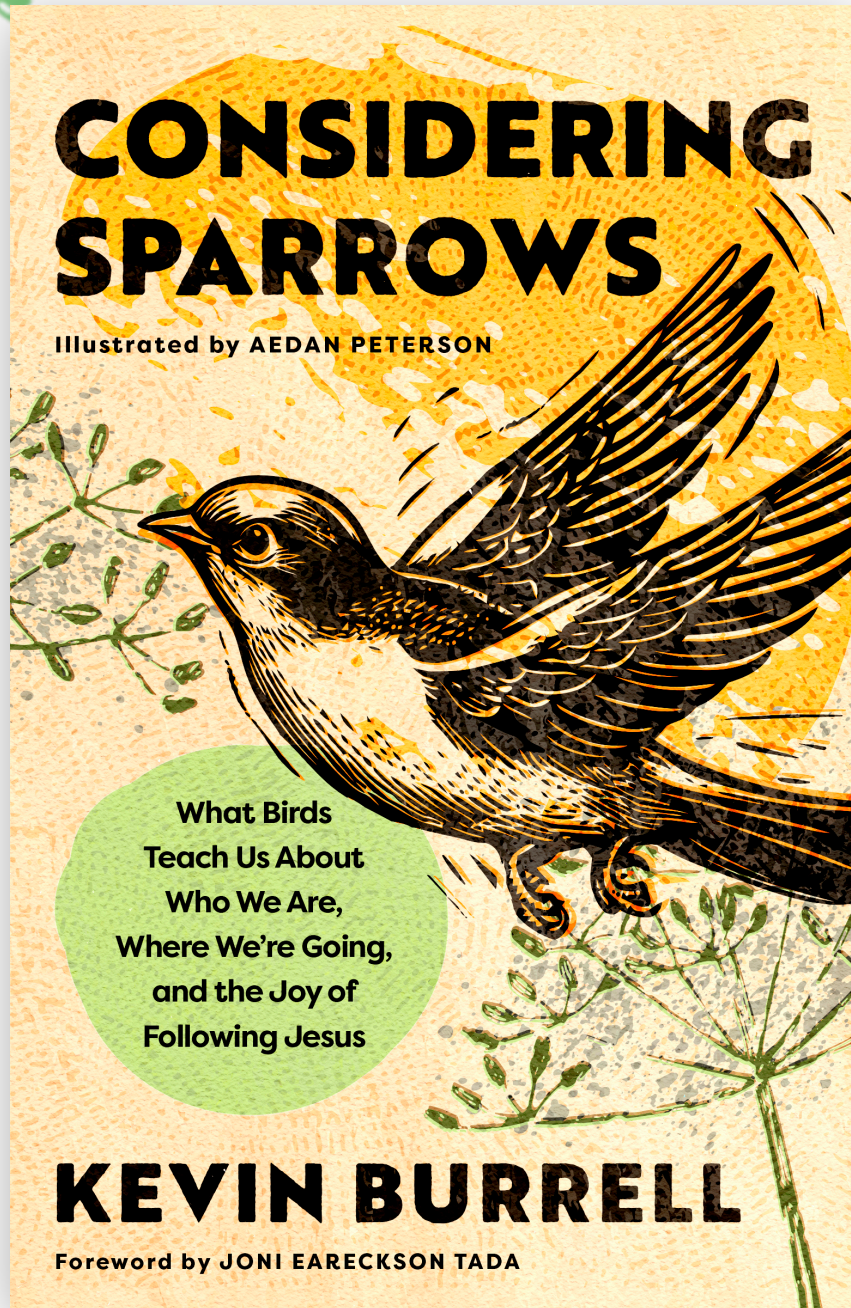


# SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE



Guide to accompany the book  
*Considering Sparrows: What Birds Teach Us About Who We Are, Where We're  
Going, and the Joy of Following Jesus*

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Published by Multnomah  
An imprint of the Penguin Random House Christian Publishing Group,  
a division of Penguin Random House LLC  
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

[waterbrookmultnomah.com](http://waterbrookmultnomah.com)

[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

Hardcover ISBN 979- 8- 217-15226-1  
Ebook ISBN 979- 8- 217-15227-8

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# CONSIDERING SPARROWS WITH YOUR FLOCK

*Warning. This introductory page contains at least twenty-five gratuitous bird puns.*

If you've decided to hatch a group study of *Considering Sparrows*, I hope these questions will help your group take flight. There are several ways you could fly with this resource.

Of course, the straightforward approach would be to peck away at it a chapter at a time. The questions should be enough to egg on a reasonable amount of group discussion for each chapter. But spending sixteen weeks on this study might be hard to swallow for your group, and you don't want to ruffle any feathers. So...

Another approach might be to pair it, covering two chapters per study, so as to kill two birds with one stone. Two can be a lot, so the group leader will want to give the questions a flyover in advance, deciding which ones to use for an abridged flight-time. You may even choose to read both chapters but only perch on one for the group discussion.

If you'd prefer to fly through this more quickly, a study of Philippians breaks nicely into its four chapters. Here's how *Considering Sparrows* covers Paul's letter in swift fashion:

Philippians 1: Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Philippians 2: Chapters 5 (partially), 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Philippians 3: Chapters 10, 11, and 12.

Philippians 4: Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, and the Epilogue.

Some other assorted tidbits:

- Each chapter's questions begin with a "starter question"—an icebreaker to incubate some pertinent discussion. As any group leader is well aware, icebreaker questions can easily scavenge valuable group time, so it might be wise to set a timer, ensuring that your group has time to roost on the more pertinent discussion.
- I didn't provide discussion questions for the prologue, but if group members read this in advance, they'll have a helpful birds-eye view of the approach and the "why" of the book.
- For one of your studies, you might find caws to try out the "Prayer of Preparation" on page xv.
- Aedan Peterson did a stellar job homing in on the themes (not just birds) in his illustrations. A bonus question for each chapter might be "How does the illustration capture the teaching?"
- If feasible, might I suggest that your flock gather outside, or maybe even land the last week at a local park?

However you choose to use this study guide, I hope it's helpful to you in pondering and discussing the book, so you don't have to wing it.

May the Lord bless your group discussion as you "consider the birds" together!

Grace n' Peace,  
Kevin Burrell  
ornitheology.com





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 1: THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

1. **STARTER:** What's the most interesting/unique animal you've ever seen in captivity?
2. Read together the story of the beginning of the Philippian church in **Acts 16:11-40**.
3. The book of Acts names several of the first converts of Europe's first church. What's different about their backgrounds, their conversion stories, and their effect on others? What might the modern-day equivalent of each of them be?
4. Read together **Philippians 1:12-26**. Remembering that this letter was probably read aloud to the church in a public setting, listen to these words as if you were Lydia, or the slave girl, or the Philippian jailer. What would you especially notice?
5. The book says, "Paul's cage doesn't impede his witness; it amplifies it" (p. 7). How is God using Paul's prison sentence?
6. "God does some of his best work in cages. Should we be surprised? Our faith is built on it." (p. 9) How did Jesus demonstrate this? How might this change the way we view the hardships of our own lives?
7. The last question of the chapter asks, "How might your cell be your stage to magnify your Savior?" How would you answer?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 2: ALBATROSS COMMITMENTS

1. **STARTER:** Share a story you've seen or experienced of commitment or affection amongst animals. It might be a loyal pet, an observation in nature, or even something you saw online or in a documentary.
2. Read together **Philippians 1:1-6**.
3. According to the book, monogamous species like albatrosses are “faithful but not enduring” (p. 16). What does that mean? What would be the human equivalent?
4. What hints do we see in 1:1-6 of a faithful “horizontal” fellowship between Paul and the Philippians? See also 1:7-8, 1:24-25, 2:17, 4:14-16, or any other places in Philippians.
5. Verse 6 talks about the “vertical” relationship between the Philippians and God. What gives Paul confidence that the Lord will endure with the Philippians?
6. Why doesn't God make Abram walk between the sacrificial pieces in Genesis 15? What does this anticipate?
7. If you're “prone to wander like a Wandering Albatross” (p. 21), what gives you confidence that the Lord is committed to you? Think especially of **John 13:1**. What should your response be?

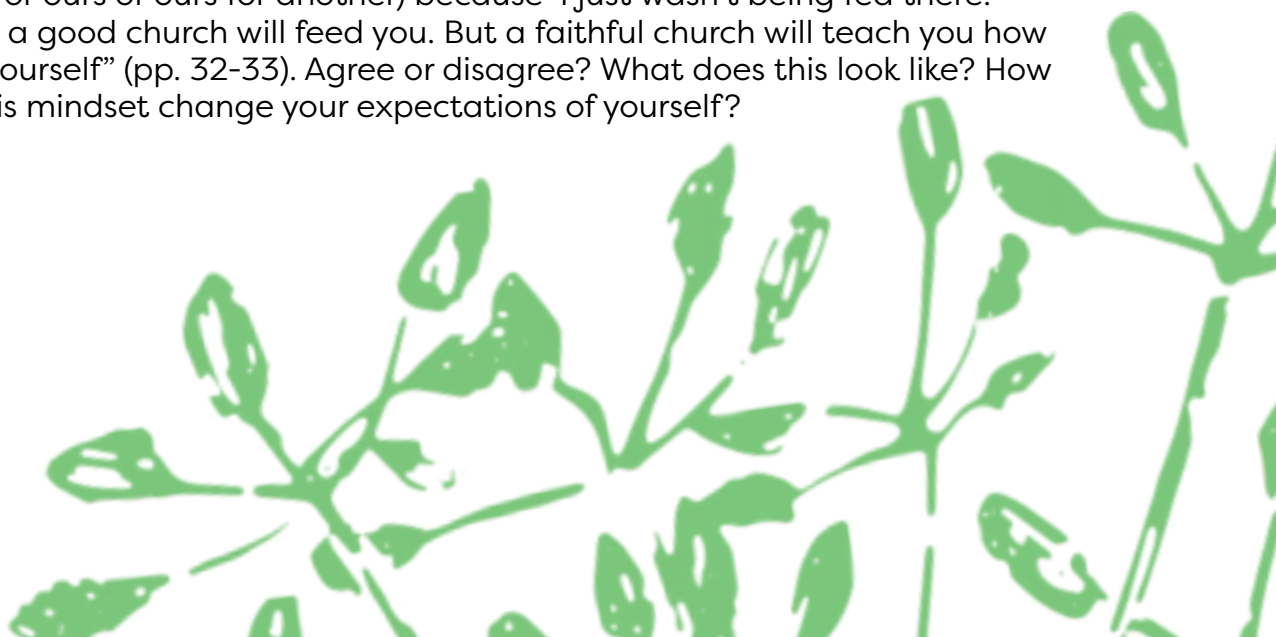




## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 3: THE EMPTY NEST

1. **STARTER:** What traits or abilities do you think are essential for a child to eventually “leave the nest”? If applicable, briefly share a personal story, either of your own fledging from the nest, or that of one of your children.
2. Read together **Philippians 1:7-11**.
3. What grabs your attention about the sorts of things Paul is praying for the Philippians in this passage? Which aspects would be most meaningful for someone to pray for *you*?
4. Pages 25-27 discuss the differences between precocial and altricial parenting in birds. Briefly describe each. How does the book compare these two strategies to the common ways we grow disciples in our churches? Which style has been more apparent (pun intended) in the church environments you’ve been a part of?
5. Read **Mark 3:13-15**. Describe Jesus’ strategy for discipleship during the three years of his earthly ministry. What were his expectations of the Twelve? How does this differ from how we disciple people today?
6. How might our discipleship model the training tactics of a Peregrine Falcon?
7. The author writes, “People often tell me that they’ve left a church (either another for ours or ours for another) because ‘I just wasn’t being fed there.’ Granted, a good church will feed you. But a faithful church will teach you how to feed yourself” (pp. 32-33). Agree or disagree? What does this look like? How might this mindset change your expectations of yourself?

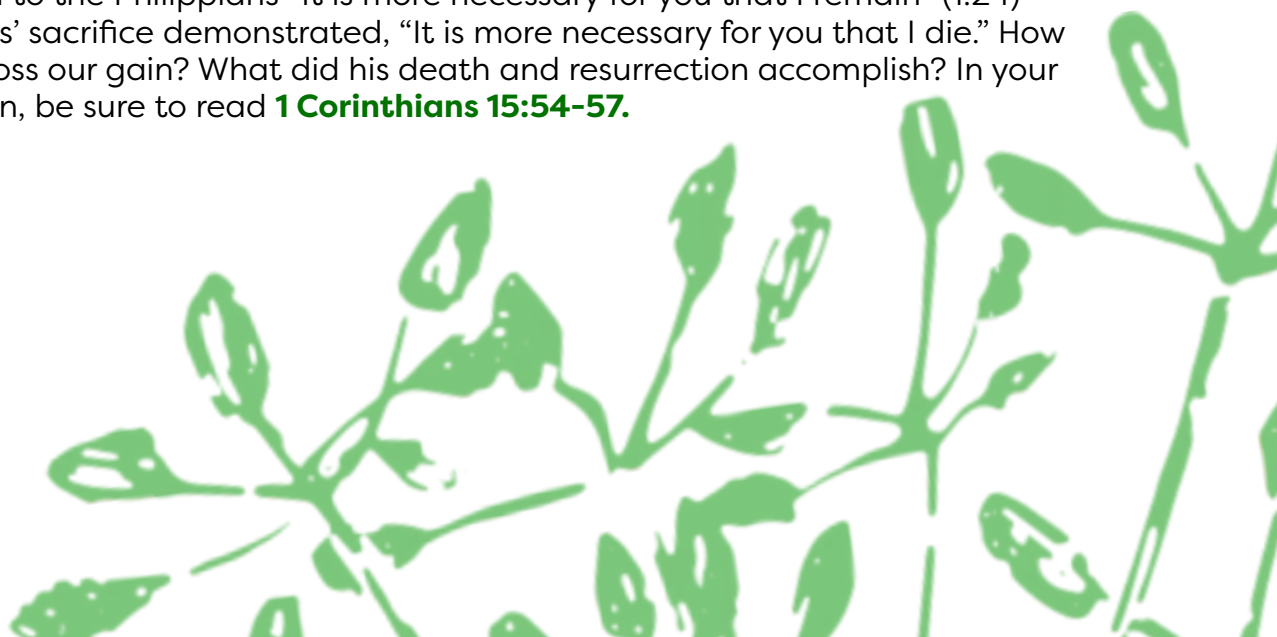




## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 4: BIRD FUNERALS

1. **STARTER:** What is your favorite redemptive movie death scene? (Some examples to prime your thinking: Darth Vader in *Return of the Jedi*, Spock in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, Tony Stark in *Avengers: Endgame*, Maximus in *Gladiator*, Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*, etc.)
2. Read together **Philippians 1:18-26**.
3. Paul has a healthy perspective on death, shaped in part by his varied experiences. Read **2 Corinthians 11:24-25** as a summary of some of these experiences. The author writes, “I want to learn about how to face death from a guy like *that*” (p. 38). What can we learn?
4. When Paul says, “To die is gain,” (v. 21) what is he talking about? What is your hope of gain, and what is it based on? Read the Richard Baxter quote on page 40. What will be present—and what will be absent—when a believer reaches that hope?
5. How did the early church utilize the phoenix as an image of resurrection?
6. The book suggests that a better image of our resurrection hope might be the vulture. Summarize the analogy. Did this description resonate with you, or did you find it uncomfortable (or both)?
7. Paul said to the Philippians “It is more necessary for you that I remain” (1:24) but Jesus’ sacrifice demonstrated, “It is more necessary for you that I die.” How was his loss our gain? What did his death and resurrection accomplish? In your discussion, be sure to read **1 Corinthians 15:54-57**.

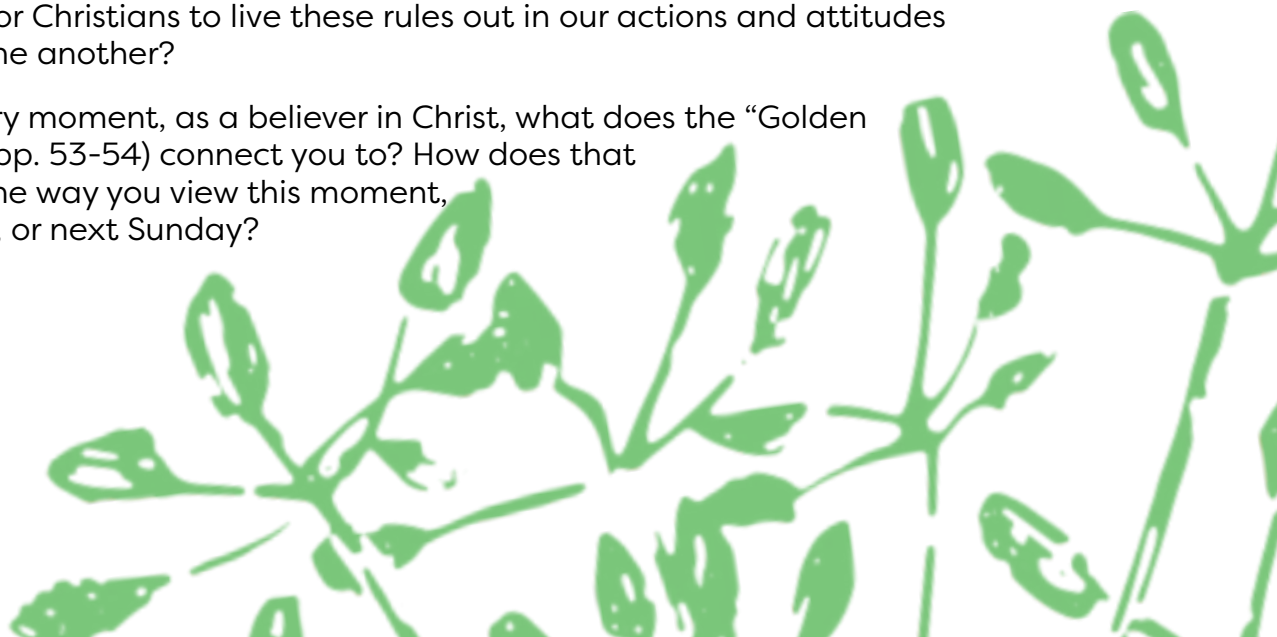




## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 5: BIRDNADOS AND MURMURATIONS

1. **STARTER:** Describe a time when you've seen an enormous group of individuals performing a coordinated task. It could be humans doing "the wave" at a sporting event or singing together at a concert, or it could be animals: birds in migration, ants making a nest, etc.
2. Read together **Philippians 1:27-2:4**.
3. What is Paul calling the Philippians to in 2:2? What is this exhortation rooted in (in verse 1)? What do you find hard or challenging about Paul's words here?
4. When the Bible describes Jesus' relationship to his Church, it uses images like head and body, vine and branches, cornerstone and building, groom and bride, or shepherd and flock. What do all of these images have in common? Also consider the differences; what aspects of the work and character of Jesus does each image showcase?
5. The author writes that believers are "cohesively unified (even when they don't act like it) because Christ the King is the head that holds every cell of the body together" (p. 53). And Joni Eareckson Tada writes, "Believers are never told to *become* one; we already *are* one and are expected to act like it." (p. 55). How does this change the way we view fellow believers and the way we act toward one another?
6. What are the "three rules" of starling murmuration (see p. 51)? What would it look like for Christians to live these rules out in our actions and attitudes toward one another?
7. At this very moment, as a believer in Christ, what does the "Golden Thread" (pp. 53-54) connect you to? How does that change the way you view this moment, this week, or next Sunday?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 6: TREECREEPER HUMILITY

1. **STARTER:** Social media has groups dedicated to sharing humorous stories of “bird aggression.” Have you ever been a victim of bird aggression? Share your tale.
2. Read together **Philippians 2:5-11**.
3. The author says that the tree creeper’s behavior makes it a helpful picture of our pursuit of humility. Explain.
4. What’s challenging about the sin of pride? Consider especially the words from C.S. Lewis and William Farley on p. 62.
5. What is humility *not*? On p. 62 several examples are given: low self-esteem, false modesty, or cowardice. What’s different about true humility?
6. John Dickson talks about history’s “humility revolution.” What happened and what appears to have caused it? (See pp. 63-64).
7. Walk through the seven downward steps Jesus took in his pathway of humility. As a group, discuss each one in progression (you’ll find this on pp. 65-67).
8. Where is it hardest for you to practice humility? How can Jesus be both the example we follow and the power that we rely on to grow in humility?

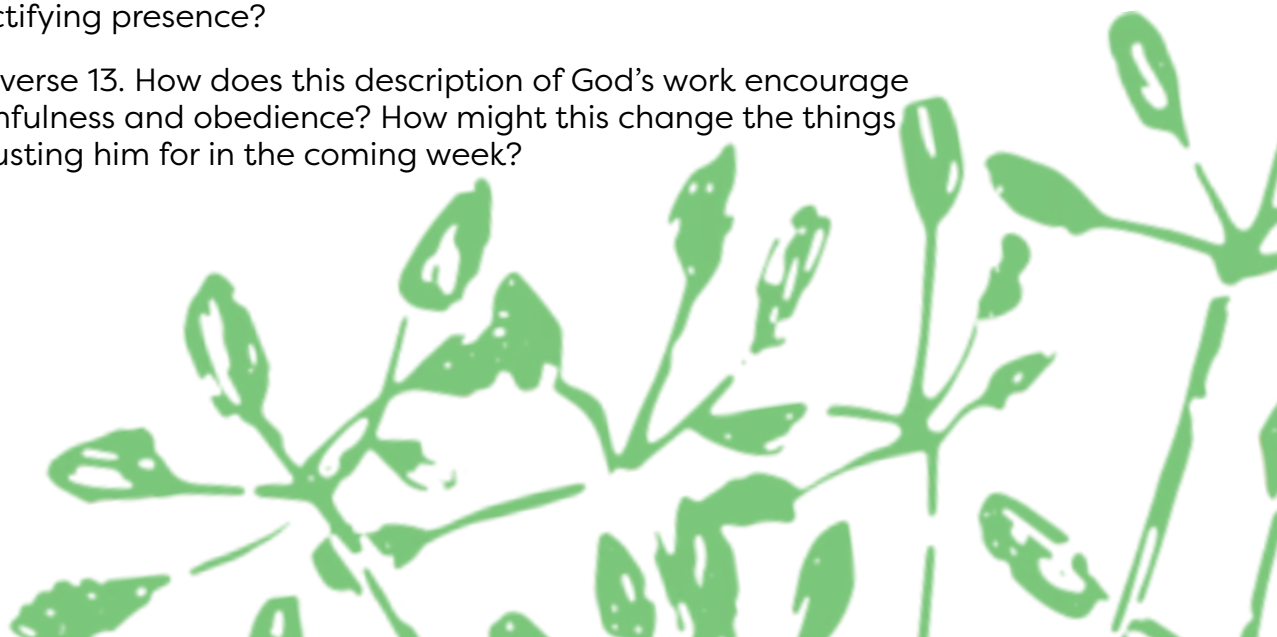




## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 7: HONEYGUIDE PARTNERSHIPS

1. **STARTER:** What's the best team you've ever worked on? (Think broadly: a department at work, a sports team, a volunteer group, a committee planning an event, etc.). Briefly share what the team did, but more importantly, describe what made the team excellent. What healthy qualities did it exhibit?
2. Read together **Philippians 2:12-13**.
3. Briefly recap the means of partnership that the Greater Honeyguide and the Yao hunter have worked out. In what way is the Christian life lived in partnership with God? How do these two verses of Philippians describe that partnership?
4. What does it mean to "carry out your salvation with fear and trembling" (v. 12)? What *doesn't* it mean? (See pages 75-77; discuss how the translation "Work out your salvation" might be confusing, or the concept of approaching God with "fear and trembling").
5. The author describes verse 12 as saying, in essence, "Work out what was worked in" (p. 77). Explain. What does it mean to "cooperate with his work in us"?
6. Read **Hebrews 12:6**, **John 15:5**, and **Ephesians 2:10**. What does the Lord promise to those who "embrace the blade" of his sanctifying work? How might your current challenges be a sign NOT of his absence but of his very intentional and sanctifying presence?
7. Re-read verse 13. How does this description of God's work encourage your faithfulness and obedience? How might this change the things you're trusting him for in the coming week?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 8: A BIRD MASCOT FOR THE CHURCH

1. **STARTER:** What's your "bird mascot"? If you could choose any bird to describe yourself, what would it be, and why?
2. Read together **Philippians 2:14-18**.
3. What's good about the "penguin tactic" of the church's cultural engagement (read **2 Corinthians 6:14-18** and **1 John 2:15**), and yet where does it fall short?
4. What's good about the "potoo tactic" of the church's cultural engagement (read **1 Corinthians 9:22**), and yet where does it fall short?
5. What's good about the "blue jay tactic" of the church's cultural engagement (read **Galatians 2:11** and **Titus 1:10-11**), and yet where does it fall short?
6. Why does the author prefer the image of a hummingbird in describing the church's cultural connections? How does Philippians 2:15-16 picture our role in the world?
7. Why is the last paragraph of this chapter (p. 95) crucial to keep in mind as we live out our purpose in the world?

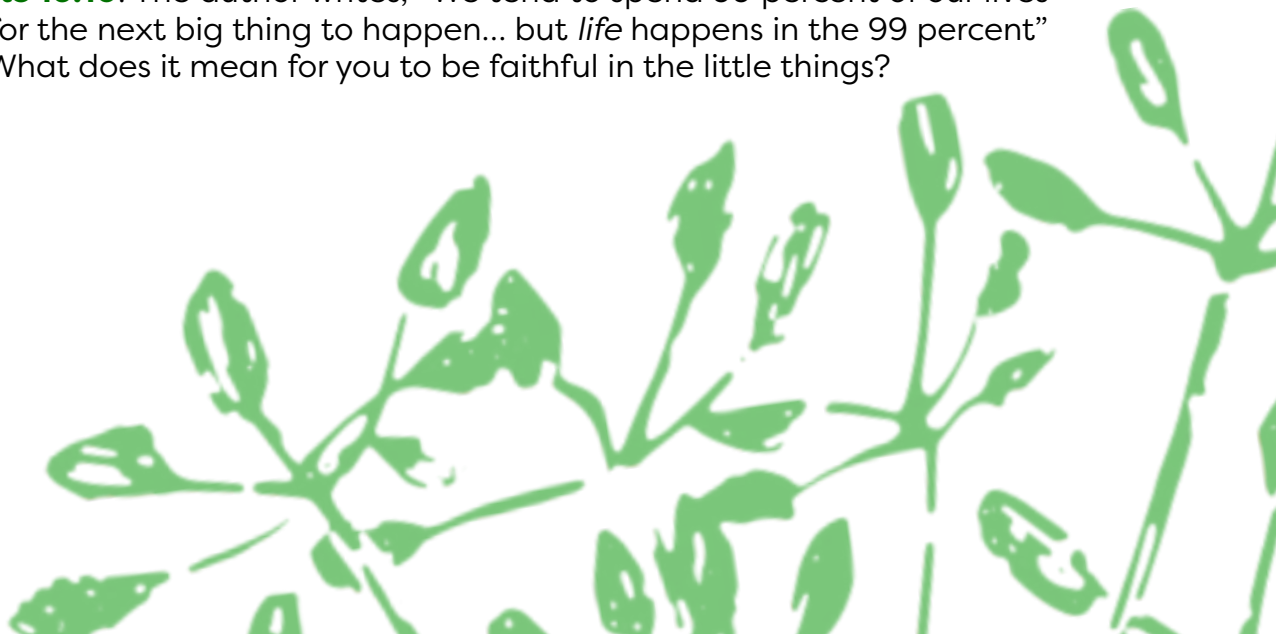




## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 9: THE CONTENTIONS AND COURTESIES OF CROWS

1. **STARTER:** Are you good at remembering people's names? Does it come naturally to you, or do you have techniques you've used to help you remember? Share a story with the group of a success or failure in remembering someone's name.
2. Read together **Philippians 2:19-26 and 4:2-3**.
3. Crows remember faces. What's potentially encouraging about that fact, and what's concerning?
4. Re-read 4:2-3. What hints have we had in the prior chapters of Philippians that there was an interpersonal tension in the church that Paul wanted to address?
5. The Bible never included the exact nature of the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche. Why do you think the Lord chose to keep that information from us? How might that omission actually *help* us in the current disagreements and arguments in our churches?
6. The author says that Timothy and Epaphroditus "portray the heart of a shepherd with the dutifulness of a UPS driver" (p. 105). What does Paul commend Timothy for (2:20-22)? And what does he commend Epaphroditus for (2:25-30)? How do they picture both care and dutifulness?
7. Read **Luke 16:10**. The author writes, "We tend to spend 99 percent of our lives waiting for the next big thing to happen... but *life* happens in the 99 percent" (p. 107). What does it mean for you to be faithful in the little things?

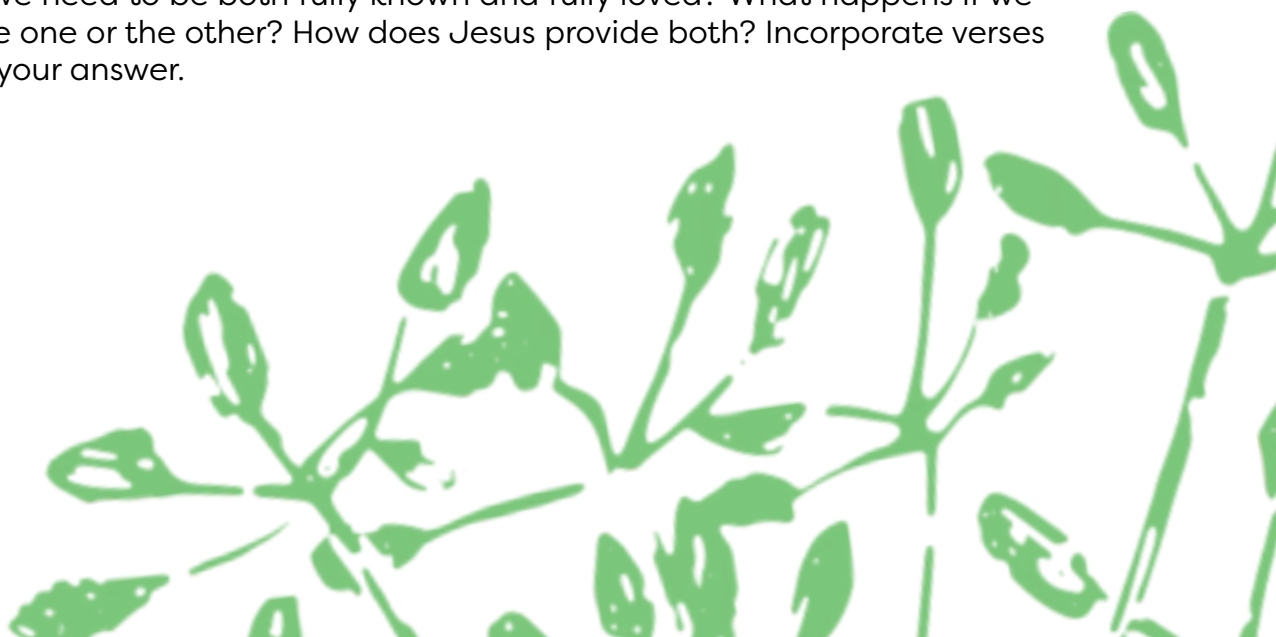




## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 10: BOWERBIRD TREASURES

1. **STARTER:** Briefly describe a personal collection you've accumulated. Stamps, coins, Beanie Babies, coffee mugs, you name it. How long have you been invested in this collection? What's your most prized item in your collection?
2. Read together **Philippians 3:1-11**.
3. Briefly summarize the behavior of the Satin Bowerbird. The author observes, 'We give this hapless bird a nervous laugh because if we look too closely, we might see ourselves, standing center stage among an unappreciated collection of treasures and trophies.' Does the bowerbird's collection remind you of human behavior? How so?
4. What was seemingly to Paul's credit, before he discovered Christ? Review his "Sevenfold Pedigree" in verses 4-6. What does he call these things in verses 7-8? Why?
5. The author says, "Our best competencies, when seen as the key components of our identity, become dangerous to us" (p. 116). Why? Why aren't they just "neutral"?
6. What is freeing about realizing you can't earn points with God? Page 117 may help you in discussing this question.
7. Why do we need to be both fully known and fully loved? What happens if we only have one or the other? How does Jesus provide both? Incorporate verses 8-9 into your answer.

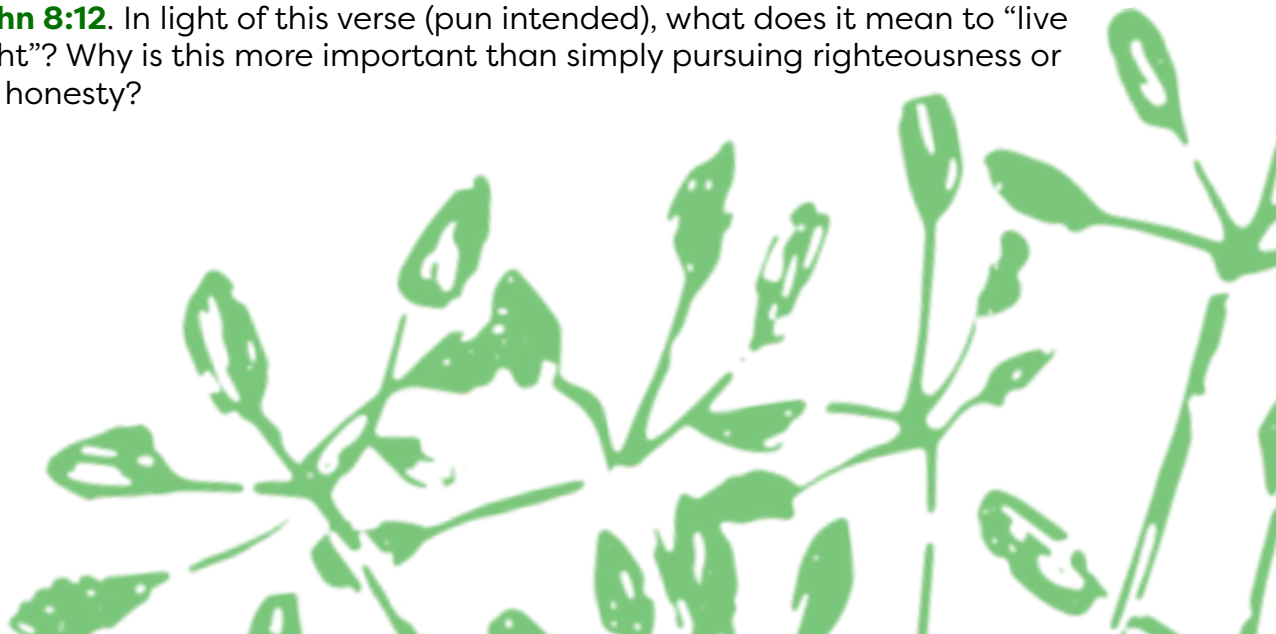




## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 11: TERN PURSUITS

1. **STARTER:** What's the furthest you've ever traveled? Share one memorable aspect of that trip.
2. Read together **Philippians 3:12-16**.
3. No other animal on the planet lives more of its life in daylight than the Arctic Tern. How does it accomplish this? Briefly trace its annual cycle.
4. In describing the goal that Paul is "pressing on toward" (verse 14), he writes in verse 12, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." For what purpose did Christ Jesus take hold of us? What does it mean for us to take hold of that too?
5. Similarly, in verse 16 he writes, "Only let us live up to what we have already attained." What have we already attained in Christ? What does it mean to live up to that?
6. Read **Psalms 97:11** and **Proverbs 4:18**. What does it mean from these verses to "live in the light"? What obstacles are present in this pursuit?
7. Read **1 John 1:7**. How does walking in the light create fellowship with one another? Why does "living in the light" require more than simply living transparently?
8. Read **John 8:12**. In light of this verse (pun intended), what does it mean to "live in the light"? Why is this more important than simply pursuing righteousness or pursuing honesty?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 12: THE HOMING OF PIGEONS

1. **STARTER:** On a scale of one to ten, how good is your sense of direction? Explain your answer. Where do you find it most challenging to maintain a sense of direction?
2. Read together **Philippians 3:17-21**.
3. This chapter is a call to a better sense of our heavenly home, while also gaining a sense of being placed for a purpose in our earthly space. Why did the author pick a pigeon to illustrate this?
4. Dennis Johnson wrote, “The city that defines your identity is neither the one in which you were born nor the one in which you were raised. It is the city toward which you are moving” (page 138). What does he mean by that? What does it mean to live in the reality that “our citizenship is in heaven” (verse 20)?
5. Why was citizenship an especially important concept to the Philippians? See pages 138-139. How does this help us understand our purpose today in this world?
6. The author writes, “Your purpose includes your place. God has sovereignly set you on the map, in this place and time” (page 140). When you think about your purpose in the world, what difference does your geography make? What can we learn from the fact that our savior was referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth”?
7. Some people say that Christians are “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” What evidence does this chapter provide to the contrary?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 13: CONSIDERING SPARROWS

1. **STARTER:** Describe a time when you've noticed something (or someone) that was there all along but overlooked? What caused you to finally take notice?
2. Read together **Philippians 4:4-7**.
3. Jesus' audience of disciples may have thought of the sparrow as "the vermin on the mount." Why? Briefly recall some of the public sentiment toward sparrows described in the book.
4. What is a *qal va-homer* argument (see page 150)? How does Jesus use this form when he tells us to consider birds in **Matthew 6:26-27**?
5. How does Jesus' commitment to care for us connect to Paul's words in Philippians 4:6-7?
6. On page 152, the author lists several of his own personal "trophies" where God's comforting care was especially tangible. Let a few members of your group share one of their own. Specifically, how does an event of that type give us strength against anxiety? How does "thanksgiving" (verse 6) help us to "fear not"?
7. Looking back on our lives, what evidences can all Christians point to that God is committed to care for us? Consider especially **Romans 8:31-32**.





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 14: MOCKINGBIRD MATURITY

1. **STARTER:** If you could take free lessons to learn or grow in something (an ability, a sport, a growth opportunity, a skill, etc.), what lessons would you take? (And—if you know—who would you take them from?).
2. Read together **Philippians 4:8-9**.
3. Why is the mockingbird a good mascot for a mindset of discipleship?
4. Why does Paul so frequently encourage others to imitate him? Consider also Philippians 3:17, 1 Corinthians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 11:1, and 2 Thessalonians 3:9. What safeguards does he include? Why?
5. What's hard about imitation? The author explains two pitfalls on page 161, one for the person following the example, and one for the person setting the example. Explain. In your own experience, is it easier to imitate good habits or bad ones?
6. The author writes, "In the end, Paul's list is really a call to pursue the character of Christ—the One who is all these things and more" (page 162). Why? Spend some time reflecting on the attributes of Philippians 4:8-9 as seen in the life of Jesus.
7. If you're willing to share with the group, what might be a place where God is calling you to *pursue* a mentor in a specific area, or to *be* a mentor in a specific area?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 15: THE STRENGTH OF EAGLES

1. **STARTER:** If you could receive any superpower, what power would you choose to possess?
2. Read together **Philippians 4:10-13**.
3. When you think of “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (verse 13), what sorts of “all things” come to mind? And how have you seen this verse used in “power of eagles” sorts of ways?
4. The author writes that verse 13 “is not an invincibility suit or a guarantee of crossing the finish line first. It’s better” (page 171). How? Go back to re-read the context in verses 11-12.
5. Jeremiah Burroughs calls contentment “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition” (page 172). Discuss the definition; what’s helpful, challenging, or confusing about it?
6. In what areas is it hardest for you to achieve contentment?
7. Why is a Mallard a good mascot for contentment?
8. The author writes, “There’s a sense in which Christians should be the most discontented people on the planet” (page 174). Why is this?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# CHAPTER 16: THE PROVISION OF RAVENS

1. **STARTER:** Briefly share a story of a time when the Lord provided for you in a specific or surprising way.
2. Read together **Philippians 4:14-23**.
3. How might verse 19 be misused? How does the context of this verse help us stay grounded in our application of it?
4. How is the raven well-suited in the Bible as a mascot of God's provision? Consider some of the verses presented in the chapter: Job 38:41, Psalm 147:9, and 1 Kings 17:4 for starters.
5. In the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 17, why is the raven an unlikely picture of God's provision? Why would God use ravens in this episode?
6. In considering his own needs, where is Paul's focus in these verses? Think especially about verses 17-18.
7. Ravens deliver news. What is the good news of the gospel, and how does it demonstrate God's desire to "meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus" (verse 19)?





## CONSIDERING SPARROWS

# EPILOGUE: THE DAWN CHORUS

*(The epilogue might best be paired with another chapter, but here are three questions to engage your discussion of it).*

1. Did the image of the dawn chorus better help you picture the assembling of the saints in worship around the eternal throne? Discuss this image.
2. What is joy, and why is it important in the Christian life?
3. How do we grow in our joy by looking both “backwards and forwards”?







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