

PHILIPPIANS: INVITATION TO JOY (1:21-30)

BEFORE THE LESSON

As we continue in the series on Philippians, we move to the part of Paul's letter where, despite his desire to go and be with Jesus, he senses God's call to live and serve Christ where he is — in this case, a prison in Rome. In this passage Paul speaks about joy and suffering as though they are both privileges awarded to followers of Jesus, which is not a message we like to hear, but need to. Everyone experiences suffering in their lives and Paul gives us an example of how we can find joy in the hardest seasons. This season of coronavirus is no exception.

STARTING THE LESSON

The story behind the book of Philippians sounds like a contradiction — a letter about joy, written from jail. We would expect someone in prison to write about anger, or frustration, or sadness, but that isn't what Paul focuses on in his letter to his friends in Philippi. In this week's discussion, we'll get a peek into what drove Paul's mindset, and what we can emulate in our own lives.

STARTER QUESTION

- How would you describe the difference between *happiness* and *joy*?
- What's a small act of kindness shared with you at any point in your life that made your day?

OPENING PRAYER

"Jesus, thank you for setting for us the example of how to suffer well. We ask you to be present with us during our discussion today and give us comfort and compassion as we have the courage to talk about suffering in our lives. Amen."

BIBLE PASSAGE REFERENCE

Philippians 1:21-30 NIV

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;

express comfort, unease, or a number of other emotions in connection with this passage.

TIPS TO SHARE WITH LEADERS

As we speak about suffering, it is important to remember that while we all experience suffering to some degree, it may not look the same for everyone. Comparing suffering (i.e., "your situation is nothing next to mine") belittles the pain of our brothers and sisters rather than creating empathy for one another. Should the discussion start veering in this direction, gently remind your group that every experience of suffering is valid, no matter how large or small.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1

- Right out of the gate we start with Paul's famous statement that "to live is Christ and to die is gain." When have you heard this line and what has it meant to you?

Group members will have different contexts for this verse: maybe a memorable sermon, a poignant funeral, or something else. They may

QUESTION 2

- As we know, Paul penned this letter while in prison in Rome. What two possibilities was Paul considering here? Do you think you would have found yourself considering the same, were you in his position?

According to v. 23-24, he was debating between departing to be with Christ and remaining in the body.

QUESTION 3

BIBLE PASSAGE REFERENCE (continued)

24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. 27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel 28 without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. 29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

- The New Living Translation translates v. 23-24 as, “I’m torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.” Paul identified that his possibilities moving forward involved a possibility that was preferable for him and a possibility that was better for others. Ultimately, what did Paul sense that God was calling him to – his own preferences, or a call to remain and serve others?

Paul determined that God was calling him to stay and serve others (v. 25: “Convinced of this, I know that I will remain...”).

QUESTION 4

- Paul uses the word *joy* sixteen times in this short letter to his friends in Philippi. As we mentioned in the introduction to today’s study, this topic seems out of place for a note written from prison. Reread v. 25-26 aloud. Whose joy is Paul focusing on here?

The Philippians — Paul determines that God will allow him to remain so that he may help his friends grow and experience the joy of their faith.

QUESTION 5

- When we find ourselves in hard situations it is easy to fall into the role of victim and only see our own despair. However, we see in this passage that while Paul is suffering in prison, he chooses to

focus on serving others and helping them to find joy in their faith. Based on Paul’s example, how can we find personal purpose in the middle of our suffering?

Like Paul, we can choose to focus outside of ourselves and look for ways we can serve others. This isn’t going to take away our suffering — Paul was no less of a prisoner for thinking this way — but it will help us to continue living a life of meaning if we are looking at the big picture, the wider kingdom of God, and what we can do to continue serving Jesus and his people even while we may be suffering.

QUESTION 6

- What advice does Paul give to the Philippians in the beginning of v. 27? As continued in this verse and the next, what does he expect to be the outcome of following that advice?

To “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Paul is asking them to live as if the good news of Jesus were true, and they were proof. He expects to find them striving together, fighting as one in the Spirit to embody the gospel and not be afraid of their enemies.

QUESTION 7

- In the NLT, Paul’s advice begins in v. 27 with the request that “you must live as citizens of Heaven.” What does it mean to you to live as a citizen of Heaven while still on Earth, and possibly in less-than-ideal circumstances? How does this help you find joy?

We can find joy in knowing that Heaven is where the Lord resides, a place where all is made right — and that because Jesus came to Earth to live among us, we are able to experience the hope of heaven while we still live, too. How we live that out and how it brings us joy will differ from person to person.

QUESTION 8

- According to v. 29, what have followers of Christ been granted?

Not only belief, but suffering.

QUESTION 10

- In The Message translation, v. 29-30 read: “There’s far more to this life than trusting in Christ. There’s also suffering for him. And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting.” It’s hard to hear that suffering is as much a gift as trust. We would much rather *not* be given the gift of suffering. But Paul writes here as if suffering were a privilege awarded to Christ-followers. If so, what privileges have you encountered in your times of suffering? Were you able to meet God there?

Leaders: Encourage your group members to share with as little or as much detail as they feel comfortable and thank them for sharing their stories with the group. These may be hard and complicated stories to share for some. Feel free to take a break here to pray with members as needed should they still be experiencing or working through the aftermath of a season of suffering.

PRAYER MINISTRY

- **Suggestion 1: A Passage from Psalms in Unison**

Leader: Post Psalm 57:1-3 on the Zoom chat, or ask members to look up the passage on their devices in the same translation. Read the paragraph below aloud, then encourage your group to gather closely together (likely virtually) before leading a reading of the passage. (You may choose to have different members take turns reading this text aloud, or to read it aloud together.) Following a moment of quiet reflection, close the group in prayer, or ask each person to take turns praying a blessing over one other group member, before closing your time together..

The question of why suffering exists in the world is something we may never know the answer to this side of Heaven. But while we are in the middle of it, while we are watching those around us and those that we love go through it, we can take solace in the knowledge that Jesus understands what it means to suffer, and that many of his followers (like Paul) know, too. We all suffer uniquely but we are not alone in our suffering. Paul asked the readers of this letter to “stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one (v. 27).” Today, let’s symbolically join together and in one voice, read a prayer from Psalms 57:1-3 (below).

1 Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy! I look to you for protection. I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until the danger passes by.

2 I cry out to God Most High, to God who will fulfill his purpose for me.

3 He will send help from heaven to rescue me, disgracing those who hound me, – My God will send forth his unfailing love and faithfulness. (Psalm 57:1-3 NLT)

- **Suggestion 2: Bringing Joy**

In the passage we studied today, Paul determined that God would allow him to remain alive so that he might help his friends find joy in their faith. How are you helping your friends and family find joy in their faith? As a group, brainstorm some ways you can “surprise and delight” those around you, especially those who are suffering (*for example, writing notes of encouragement, sending flowers to those you know who are isolated, or gifting something fun or unexpected to someone struggling*). Decide on one or two things you can do either individually, as couples/families, or as a group to bring joy to someone around you in the next week. Have fun with it!

Note: This study was written as an act of service by Wesleigh Mowry.