

PHILIPPIANS: INVITATION TO JOY (2:1-30)

BEFORE THE LESSON

The Apostle Paul had a special relationship with the church of Philippi. They had a deep mutual respect for one another that was born over many years of shared ministry. They worshipped together, they suffered together, and the Philippian church helped to support Paul's ministry financially. This was the first church that Paul planted in Europe. The core of the church was women. It initially met in the home of Lydia, one of Paul's first converts in Europe, and a successful businesswoman. As there were not enough Jewish men in the city to form a synagogue, the women would meet by the river for prayer, and it was here that the Philippian church began. Paul and his travelling companion Silas were later imprisoned in Philippi for their work in establishing the church. God miraculously freed them from prison through an earthquake, all of which led to the conversion of the jailer and his family. The city officials feared Paul's faith and asked him and his team to leave, but Paul was able to leave on his own terms because he was unjustly imprisoned without the trial that he was entitled to as a Roman citizen. Many scholars believe this gave him the opportunity to prepare the church for the hard times ahead and also to leave his fellow worker Luke (the beloved physician and author of Luke/Acts) to reside in the city for several years to provide training, leadership, and stability for their newfound faith. (Read Acts 16. The "we" passages in Luke's book of Acts end and begin again in the city of Philippi which leads us to reasonably conclude that Philippi was a base of operations for Luke's ministry). One of the primary purposes for Paul writing this letter is to thank the Philippian church for their generous financial gift which was carried to him in Rome by their fellow believer, Epaphroditus, and to let them know of his current situation and future plans and also to maintain a persevering spirit in these difficult times.

STARTING THE LESSON

Paul writes this letter while he is imprisoned in Rome. Paul is experiencing persecution for the gospel outside of the church and special challenges with some inside the church. Yet he maintains a joyful attitude. He is thrilled that "because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (1:14), though he is a little saddened that some preach with a motivation of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Paul has taken this opportunity to preach the gospel in the situation that he finds himself. He rejoices that the "whole palace guard" knows that he is in chains for Christ (1:13) and that there are even believers now among "Caesar's household" (4:21). This advance of the gospel in the midst of trying circumstance brings Paul great joy. As he notes in his second letter to Timothy, "This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained." (2 Tim. 2:8,9) Although Paul was limited in his movement as a chained prisoner, the word of God and the live-giving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ was in no way limited but rather was spreading rapidly in Rome. This brought Paul great joy and comfort.

STARTER QUESTION

- What would you consider a high point in your week? What was a low point? What did you learn from these experiences? What was the Lord teaching you?
- What do you get really excited about in life to such an extent that you would get out of your seat, stand up, and clap? Your favorite team winning a championship? News that you're going to be a grandparent? A powerful worship experience at church?

OPENING PRAYER

Philippians 2:1-30 (NIV)

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. **3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4** not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: **6** Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; **7** rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. **8** And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, **10** that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

TIPS TO SHARE WITH LEADERS

As you prepare for this lesson, spend time in prayer for each member of the group asking the Lord to give you insight and discernment into this passage so as to comfort and challenge your group to live in a way that pleases the Lord.

Strive to create an atmosphere of openness by sharing personal stories of how the Lord is working in your life and affirming group members when they share personal stories from their own lives.

Dear Heavenly Father, I pray that you would clear our minds of the distractions of this day and help us to focus on your love for us and your purposes for our lives in this world. Help us to hear and be in step with the leading of your Holy Spirit now and in the week to come. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to restore our relationship with you and give us the blessed hope of eternal life in Your Kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1

- How is Paul's understanding of "joy" the same or different from the American ideal of "the pursuit of happiness"?

The American notion of happiness is grounded in self-interest, chasing your dreams, working hard to find your place in this world, and in the end accumulating enough wealth to live a comfortable, care-free life. Paul's idea of joy is grounded in chasing "God's dream" and fulfilling the call that God has placed on his life regardless of how difficult his circumstances may be. Thus he can say in Romans 5:3-5, "I rejoice in my tribulations..." knowing that God is using the hard times to build character in him, draw him closer in his relationship to the Lord, and experience the love of God in a much deeper way as he shares the good news about Jesus. Though both

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13** for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, **15** so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky **16** as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. **17** But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. **18** So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. **20** I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. **21** For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. **22** But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. **23** I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. **24** And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

25 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. **26** For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. **27** Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. **28** Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. **29** So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, **30** because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxieties upon Him because He cares for you.” (1Pet.5:5) Scripture says, “God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (Prov.3:34;James 4:6) If a body of believers values humility and each member is looking to serve the needs of other members; the rich are helping the poor, the strong are helping the weak, the educated are serving the illiterate, then unity will occur organically in the church.

pursuits may involve challenges and hard work, Paul’s joy is rooted in fulfilling God’s purposes on this earth and he is looking for a heavenly reward from the Father not material wealth. His reward is the acclamation from the Father, “Well done, My good and faithful servant.” (2 Tim. 4:6-8)

QUESTION 2

- What is at the heart of Paul’s encouragement to the Philippian believers to “make my joy complete”? How could Paul’s joy be connected to how the Philippian believers behaved?

At the core of Paul’s calling in life was to raise up mature followers of Jesus. On the road to Damascus in Acts 9, God commissioned him to be His “Apostle to the Gentiles” to establish churches full of mature believers. When a church was struggling, Paul was struggling along with them. Paul says to the Galatian believers, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.” (Gal. 4:19). Or when they were doing well, like the Thessalonian believers who were walking strong in the Lord even in the midst of great opposition and adversity, he says “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.” (1 Thess. 2:19,20) Paul was a spiritual father to the believers in these churches that he established and it brought him great joy when his children were doing well in the Lord. (See also 2Cor. 11:28,29)

QUESTION 3

- How would you define humility and how is it related to keeping unity in the church?

Humility involves choosing to set aside your own “rights” or interests to serve the interests of others. This is in direct contrast to our natural inclination of self-preservation. Humility begins with understanding our posture before God. We should submit to His loving care as creature to Creator. Peter says, “Humble

QUESTION 4

- What does Jesus teach us about humility in verses 5-11 in the way He lived his life?

Jesus was willing to set aside his “rights” of being divine as God’s son and humbled him by becoming a man to serve the greatest need of mankind namely reconciliation to the Father resulting in eternal life for those who believe in Him. Jesus said in Mark 10:45, “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”. Jesus is the perfect model of humility. He submitted to the Father’s will by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. As the author of Hebrews declares, “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb.12:2,3) The joy of the salvation of one lost sheep or prodigal son was the great reward for Jesus’ humble submission. (see also Luke 15:10) The Father has now bestowed on Him the “Name that is above all names”. This is where our relationship with God must also begin. Jesus said “...unless you humble yourself like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt.18:3,4) Jesus invites us into relationship with him when he says in Matthew 11:28,29, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Jesus is very approachable to the weary and spiritually hungry.

QUESTION 5

- How do you reconcile Paul’s admonition to the Philippian believers to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” with his declaration to the Ephesian believers, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works that no one should boast” (Eph.2:8,9)

There is a human element and a divine element to spiritual growth. Peter teaches in 2 Pet.1:3-5, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness...For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and goodness, knowledge...” God has made His power available to us through the Holy Spirit to live a victorious Christian life but God calls us to step out in faith to work His promises and power into our lives. Both Paul and Peter use very active phrases such as “work out” and “make every effort” to describe the human element in the process of spiritual growth for a believer. Paul acknowledges that God is ultimately the One bringing blessing in our lives. He says in Phil 1:6, “He who began a good work in us will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus”. And he states in this passage in 2:13, “... for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.” (See also James 2:14-26). Spiritual growth is a partnership between the believer and the Lord in which we step out in obedience to follow Him and as a result we bear spiritual fruit and experience His life-changing power. As we “work out” our faith, He “works in” us to accomplish His purposes.

QUESTION 6

- What effect does a grumbling disposition have on other people in your life? When you are in crisis do you tend to be hopeful or pessimistic? Which is more contagious, a joyful attitude or a complaining attitude? What is God’s attitude toward grumblers? Does the Lord welcome our complaints?

Grumbling and arguing are daily struggles for most people and particularly if you are stressed out by difficult circumstances or great uncertainty in your life which is happening to many in the great pandemic of 2020. Paul was experiencing the threat of martyrdom as he awaited the outcome of his trial in Rome but he chose to look on the bright side and focused on the good things that were happening all around him. Christians were becoming bold in their faith, the Philippian church was sharing in his struggles, the Praetorian guard was hearing the gospel, and so he chose to have a joyful attitude which was rooted in his deep faith in God’s faithfulness to deliver him from any circumstance. In 1 Cor 10:10-13, Paul warns the Corinthian believers “And do not grumble...God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear...he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” Paul knew a complaining attitude could sweep through the church and destroy her unity and that is why he strongly encourages the Philippian believers to be selfless and compassionate toward each other.

QUESTION 7

- Can you think of an example from the Scriptures, history, or someone in your own life who was a “shining star” in a dark place, who held out “the word of life” in a crooked and depraved generation? What challenges did they face in walking out their faith in the midst of great opposition and adversity? What lessons can we learn from them as we try to walk with the Lord in difficult circumstances? What makes our light brighter or dimmer?

In the Old Testament, Daniel was exiled to Babylon as a young man yet remained steadfast in his faith as a shining light to that pagan society. He was so respected for his character and integrity that he was given positions of great leadership. It was his daily habit of prayer that sent him to the lion’s den. But through his miraculous deliverance from the Lord, King Darius issued a decree throughout his entire empire for his people to “fear and reverence the God of Daniel.” (Dan. 6:26) In the New Testament, Stephen was martyred for his faith and proclaimed at his death in the presence of his enemies, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Acts 8:59) Jesus is the perfect example as the light of the world. He says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus then challenges his followers in his sermon on the mount, “You are the light of the world...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:14-16). The lessons they learned is that the Lord is faithful. When Paul was in a shipwreck on his way to Rome as a prisoner, the Lord sent an angel to comfort him with the message that his life would be spared along with all the people who were sailing with him. Then he turns to his unbelieving shipmates and says, “So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.” (Acts 27:2) In the midst of crisis, Paul was declaring God’s faithfulness.

QUESTION 8

- What is Paul’s greatest hope or “boast” on the Day of Christ? How did this hope shape his life choices? Do you view success in this life from a heavenly perspective or from an earthly perspective?

Paul knew that on the Day of Christ he would have to give an account of the way he lived out his calling as an apostle and church-planter. Paul ordered his life for the day he would stand before Jesus and be reviewed for his work. His confidence on that day is the maturity of all the believers assembled in the churches that he planted. (see 1 Thess. 2:19). As Paul writes to the Corinthian believers, “I face the daily pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Cor. 11:28,29)

QUESTION 9

- What does Paul mean that he is being poured out “like a drink offering” on the sacrifice and service coming from their faith? How does Paul view suffering for the cause of Christ as an act of worship to the Lord? How does this bring him joy?
- *Paul often used the imagery of worship to describe the Christian life. He challenges the Roman Christians in Romans 12:1-2, “...present your bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” The drink offering was the final act in the temple liturgical sacrifice and so Paul sees his suffering for Christ and possible martyrdom as the crescendo of his offering of his life to God to fulfill His purposes on this earth. This truth brings him great joy. He also saw the Philippian believer’s financial gift to him as, “a fragrant offering, and acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.” (Phil. 4:18)*

QUESTION 10

- How could you become less concerned for your own interests and more concerned for those of Jesus in the coming year? Are there any dangers or traps in self-sacrifice?

In Acts 20:35, Paul shares with the Ephesian elders, "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" We should always be looking for ways to help others and share the love of Jesus. There may be times when you need to pull back and recharge your battery and spend personal time with the Lord, especially if you are the type of person who always says "yes" to a need. Even Jesus would make time to spend alone with the Father away from the bustle of his public ministry. (Matt. 14:22-23)

QUESTION 11

- Epaphroditus risked his life for God's work. What risks (not necessarily physical) could you take to advance the cause of Christ in your home, neighborhood, or work environment?

During this time of crisis, taking time to connect with neighbors, workers, friends, and family through social media and offering to lend a hand where needed can help to share the love of Jesus. My wife set up a neighborhood support group through email which has over 40 neighbors involved which has resulted in many acts of kindnesses among neighbors which normally would not have happened.

QUESTION 12

- How did Epaphroditus, Timothy, and Paul each exemplify the selfless attitude that Paul encourages the Philippian believers to pursue in verses 1-4?

Epaphroditus travelled a four-day journey from Philippi to Rome along the Egnatian Way to deliver a financial gift to Paul and to help him with his ministry as an envoy from the Philippian church. He almost died along the way from a terrible illness, but he persisted until he recovered to fulfill his mission. Paul sets him as an example to follow "because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life" (2:30). Timothy is again an example of selfless service in that he has faithfully served Paul in his mission for many years, as a son would serve his father, and has a genuine interest in the spiritual health of the Philippian believers. He is one who has proved himself over the years as a servant who puts the interests of Jesus Christ above his own. Paul gives him an amazing compliment when he says, "I have no one like him". And then Paul sets an example as one who has a joyful attitude in the midst of trying circumstances and is thinking of other's welfare above his own. He is thankful for the generous gift from the Philippians, but he is more thankful that this shows the great maturity and other-centeredness of the Philippian church and is "looking for what may be credited" to their account" (Phil. 4:17)

PRAYER MINISTRY

- Begin your prayer time by inviting the Holy Spirit to come and lead and guide your group through prophetic words, pictures, or encouragement from the Scriptures. Allow a period of silence and encourage your group members to have a receptive posture by kneeling or opening up their hands to the Lord. If you have new people in the group who are unfamiliar with the Vineyard Prayer Model, take some time to introduce them to the value we place on making time to listen and hear from the Lord in prayer.
- After two or three minutes have passed, ask if anyone has heard from the Lord in regard to how to direct our prayer time. If there are very specific prophetic words that apply to people in the group, you can choose to pray as a group for those people who want prayer. Sometimes it is wise to break up into groups of two or three which gives more people the opportunity to pray. At other times it may be wise to separate into groups along gender lines. You can mix it up from week to week as the Lord leads and with input from the other group members.