

PHILIPPIANS: INVITATION TO JOY (3:1-21)

BEFORE THE LESSON

The church in Philippi was the first that Paul started in Europe; his travels to Philippi are mentioned in Acts 16, where Philippi is described as “a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia.” Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from prison, in gratitude for a financial offering the Philippians had gathered and delivered to support Paul.

STARTING THE LESSON

TIPS TO SHARE WITH LEADERS

This study isn't intended as step-by-step instruction for how to lead your group. Instead, the material here should be used to help your group approach the topic and scripture in a way that is meaningful to them. Read through the background material and discussion questions ahead of time and pray about what God is showing you. Then, feel free to pick and choose from what's provided here in order to fuel a heartfelt conversation with your group. Connection is the priority here, with each other and with God.

We're doing a series of lessons on Paul's letter to the Philippians, which was written during his stay in a Roman prison to a church in Philippi that experienced persecution for their steadfast faith in Jesus. As we strive for joy in these challenging times, keep in mind that both the author and the readers of this letter were undergoing considerable suffering. Joy in the midst of pain was not an abstract lesson.

STARTER QUESTION

- What do you value most about yourself?
- How much control do you have over your point of view, and your attitude?

OPENING PRAYER

Holy Spirit, guide our hearts, our minds, and our words today, that we may connect with you and with each other. Mold us; refine us; refresh us; transform us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1

- What does Paul's command in verse 1 say about the nature of joy?

Because Paul is telling the Philippians to take the action of rejoicing in the Lord, it follows that rejoicing is something they can choose to do; furthermore, Paul tells them to rejoice with full knowledge of their hardship. Rejoicing, then, doesn't depend on a mood, or on circumstance.

BIBLE PASSAGE REFERENCE

¹ Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

QUESTION 2

- In what does Paul say we should boast, and where should we avoid putting our confidence?

Verse 3: For it is we...who boast in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh (our earthly attributes).

QUESTION 3

- What reasons does Paul say he has to put confidence in the flesh, if he chose to?

Paul references his heritage as a Jew, God's chosen people; his extensive knowledge of the law, his commitment to his faith, and his adherence to religious law.

QUESTION 4

- What is the single most important thing in Paul's life, such that all else is garbage?

Knowing Christ; gaining Him; being found in Him.

QUESTION 5

- Are there aspects of your life where you've put more confidence in the flesh than in knowing Christ?

You can refer to question 3 if needed, and consider the value given today to heritage, or knowledge, or commitment, or a religious "track record."

QUESTION 6

- Paul describes his process of striving for the goal of knowing Christ; what are two aspects of that process?

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.

QUESTION 7

- What should you forget behind you to know Christ?

This is a personal question; the answer isn't in the text. Reflect on how focusing on your past might hinder you.

BIBLE PASSAGE REFERENCE

(continued)

¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

QUESTION 8

- How might you strain toward what is ahead?

Paul mentions our eventual heavenly home and the transformation of our lowly bodies; we can focus on that guarantee as we move into the future.

QUESTION 9

- Based on this chapter, why do you think Paul believes it's possible to rejoice in the Lord at any time?

He mentions the unsurpassed worth of knowing Christ, our heavenly citizenship, and our glorious transformation, all of which is available to us even in the worst of earthly circumstances.

QUESTION 10

- What helps or hinders you when it comes to rejoicing in the Lord?

This discussion should lead naturally into prayer time.

PRAYER MINISTRY

- Prompt the group to share hindrances to their joy, and then pray about those things as a group. Next, ask the group to share reasons for their joy, and pray a prayer of rejoicing and thanksgiving as a group. Make sure you do both, emphasizing the possibility of joy within the reality of hardship.
- Ask each person in the group to make a list of five things they'd want to say to God if they were to write a letter to him, including at least one praise and one concern. Encourage each person to write those letters to God in the coming week, and make sure to mention that the letter doesn't need to be kept afterward or read by anyone else. The important part is to be honest and open with our heavenly Father.