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Philippians 1 – 4

“Finding Joy when Life is Hard”

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The word joy or rejoice appear 14 times in Paul’s letter¹ to the Philippian church, which makes it easy to see that this is a major theme of the letter. The difference is that he’s not referring to a candy-coated, plastic, syrupy, pretend joy that seems to surface whenever some Christians act like nothing is wrong, even when life really is tough. It is something deeper and profound; it is the working of God. It’s not something that masks the pain of life; it is something that works through the pain of life.

Paul was able to speak on the subject because he had first-hand experience with the depth of life’s struggles, not to mention the fact that he wrote this letter from prison! He wasn’t sitting on a sandy beach sipping a Tropical Smoothie singing the Vacation Bible School classic, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!”

We get a glimpse of Paul’s story in [2 Corinthians 11:23b–29](#), when he writes about experiencing joy when life is hard. In this letter you get a sense of how life has taken its toll on Paul. He writes about how he thought of dying – not suicidal thoughts – but just a matter of looking forward to heaven. ([Philippians 1:18b–26](#)) Paul knew what it was like to experience times when life presses in so hard that you despair even of life – again, he didn’t have a death wish – he was just experiencing weariness; a weariness that is partially comforted by the thought that once he got to heaven, he wouldn’t have these struggles anymore. He was weary and tired and he just wanted to go home to Heaven to be with the Lord. ([2 Corinthians 1:8–9](#)) But, he realized that it was necessary that he remain, because God wasn’t finished using him in ministry. There are a couple of things that kept him going another 13 years until Nero, the Roman Emperor, martyred him, which is the focus of this study: people, perspective and prayer.

¹ The letter to the Philippian church was written about six years after 2 Corinthians.

People

1. The friendship and partnership of the Philippian people brought Paul joy.
2. **Philippians 1:3–8** – *“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.”*
3. Now, people can be a double-edged sword; they can be a source of joy or they can try to siphon your joy.
4. Being in relationship with people is worth the risk because one of the biggest threats against joy is isolation.
5. Satan wants Christians to believe a lie and isolate themselves from other Believers; he wants them to think that no one cares or no one relates to me or no one reaches out to me.
6. Elijah experienced isolation, fear and anxiety after the wonderful victory God brought on Mt. Carmel. (**1 Kings 18:16–46**)
 - a. Queen Jezebel, the idolatrous wife of King Ahab, put out a “hit” on Elijah, which caused Elijah to run for his life! (**1 Kings 19:3**)
 - b. He fled 80 miles to Beersheba, and **1 Kings 19:4–5** tells the rest of the story: *“He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.”*
 - c. A short time later, Elijah had an encounter with God at Mt. Horeb, and he told God he believed that he was *“the only one left,”*² to which God replied, *“No, I have reserved 7,000 in Israel just like you!”*
7. Paul sees the Philippians as people who can bring him joy and, in **Philippians 4:1**, he calls them *“my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown...”*

Perspective

8. Paul makes it clear that suffering is a part of life, but Heaven is our ultimate prize.
9. In **Philippians 3:10–15a**, Paul writes: *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*

² This remark is an indication that Elijah felt as though he was the only one still serving God.

Brothers, 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, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.”

10. Paul starts out talking about the fellowship of suffering with Christ and, because Jesus suffered, Jesus is well-acquainted with our suffering.
11. Jesus rose from the dead and one day all of those who have believed in Christ will share in the resurrection from the dead, and suffering will no longer have its grip.
12. While they're in this world, Christians are called to run the race, to press on and finish well.
13. **2 Timothy 4:7–8** – *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”*
14. Believers are to continue on even though there will be painful times and tears along the way and, even though things won't make sense, realize that for Christians this life is as bad as it gets.

Prayer

15. **Philippians 4:4–9** – *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”*
16. Prayer is the pouring out of the soul with worship.
 - a. Prayer refers to wants.
17. Petition is a more intense word that means prayer or intercession for others.
 - a. Petition refers to needs.
18. Requests are to be made with *“thanksgiving.”*
 - a. Request refers to desires.
19. **Psalms 30:5** – *“...weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”*

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read [Philippians 1:1–6](#); [2:1–2](#); [3:1](#) and [4:4](#) to provide an overview for this study.
3. Spend time talking about the difference between happiness and joy.
 - a. Happiness is circumstantial and temporal.
 - i. If you have money in the bank, you're healthy, your marriage and kids are good, you like your job, etc., then you are happy; but happiness only lasts as long as those things do.
 - b. Joy is relational and eternal.
 - i. Joy comes from knowing Jesus and it's not a giddy, emotional thing, in fact, the Greek word (*chara*) means "calm delight."
 - ii. It is an assurance that all will be well no matter how things appear, because Jesus is Lord and our lives are forever safe in his arms.
 - iii. [Psalm 16:11](#) – *"You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."*
4. Provide an overview of the account of Elijah. ([1 Kings 18–19](#))
 - a. Have there been times in your life that you despaired of life ([2 Corinthians 1:8–9](#)) because things were incredibly difficult.
 - b. Allow the people in your group to share about the ways people have ministered to them, been a blessing to them, etc.
5. Do you know people who will often give the "Praise God, there's not a thing in the world wrong with me!" message?
 - a. Why do you think people do this?
 - i. Do you think some people say things like this because they believe in the bad theology of "speaking it into existence"
 - ii. Do you think it gives them a false sense of security in the Lord?
 - iii. Do people really think that there aren't times when Christians are troubled, discouraged, and weary?
 - iv. Is it that they believe letting others know about these feelings shows weakness or a lack of faith?
 - v. Do you think it's bad theology to refuse to show even the slightest hint that you're having real-life difficulties and troubles?
6. Read and discuss [2 Corinthians 11:23b–29](#).
 - a. Allow the people in your group to share experiences when they experienced times in life that were crushing and overwhelming, and well beyond "the kids are sick, the car was hit in the parking lot" things in life.
 - b. How did the Lord minister to you?

7. Pastor Gary said that real joy is “not something that masks the pain of life; it is something that works through the pain of life.”
 - a. What does real joy look like in the life of Christians you know?
 - b. What sense of Christian joy do you have in your life?
 - c. What role has suffering played in your Christian life?
 - d. Does the thought of Heaven help you when you’re going through difficult times?

8. Read and discuss **2 Timothy 4:7–8**.

9. Close your time in prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to: minister to the people in your group who’re going through difficult times; lift the weight of crushing troubles, fears and anxiety; minister to the brokenhearted; help each person to personally experience and embrace the joy of the Lord in their lives; give the assurance that they are loved and cared for through difficult days; give each person the assurance that their real home is Heaven.