

Living the Story

A Study through Scripture

Introduction:

Today's lesson is really a "How could he do that?" response to Paul's situation as listed in the book of Acts, in contrast to the words he writes in the letter to the Philippians. If you have read the final chapters of Acts, you know Paul is in prison and facing an unknown future. While he states he is hopeful for his deliverance (1.19), he really is unsure what the end result will be. When you think of his life as a whole, you think of things like beatings, imprisonment, left for dead outside the city gates, shipwrecks, and bitten by vipers. Paul certainly would have been a fun conversationalist at a dinner party!

In the midst of these kinds of circumstances, Paul writes the Philippian church to tell them to have ... joy. When I stop to think about that, I am amazed that joy would even be a possibility. I would write that the church pray for me, or remain strong in the midst of trying times, or even better, to come get me out of this mess. Nope, Paul repeatedly (13 times in 11 verses) tells the church at Philippi to have joy.

I think it goes without saying that such an attitude is an example to us all. I will not speak for you, but I often go into a funk at the smallest of things that do not go right. Joy is fleeting, easy come—easy go. How then can we use Paul's example to help us better handle the "crises" that pull us away from joy so quickly?

Summary of the Text:

I have not specifically mentioned the Acts text from this section of *The Story* because I am assuming that you will have read it at home or heard about it in Bible class. It is important to recall what is mentioned there, however. In chapters 25-28, Paul is in prison. He has a trial and appeals to Caesar, so he is going to have to be transferred to Rome for this hearing. Even though people claim he has done nothing worthy of imprisonment ever step along his journey, he continues to be held. During the transfer to Rome, the ship Paul is on wrecks and he is washed up on the island of Malta (where he gets bit by a snake!). He continues along his journey to Rome and lives the last two years that we know about in scripture under house arrest.

Christian tradition, cited by early church fathers, holds that Paul was released from this imprisonment, but was later arrested again, held in more deplorable conditions, then beheaded. If this is accurate, Paul's life does not get better. All of this mentions nothing about the beatings Paul suffered prior to chapter 25 in the book of Acts.

It is within this time period, probably during the two years of house arrest that Paul writes his letter to the Philippians. We know he is imprisoned by reading the letter. He states "whether he is in chains" (1.7) and discusses that "what has happened" to him actually allowed him to preach to those who were guarding him (1.12-14). While he is hopeful for his release (1.19), he also wants to prepare the people of Philippi for whatever will happen (1.27) and understands that he may be "poured out as a drink offering" (2.17).

Even as he understands his potential role as a "drink offering," however, he exclaims that if such a thing were to happen, "I am glad and rejoice" (2.17) and they should as well (2.18).

The word joy and derivatives of it appear 13 times in this letter (1.4, 18-2x, 25; 2.3, 17, 18, 29; 3.1; 4.1, 4-2x, 10). Joy may perhaps not be THE point Paul is trying to make (Philippians is most likely a thank you letter to this group of

LESSON #34

Date: 5/12/2013

Text: Philippians 4.4-9

The Story: Chapter 30

The Big Picture: What does it take for you to live a life of joy? The right amount of money? A great job with great co-workers? No troubles to speak of? Imprisonment? Beatings? Barely staving of death?

Materials Needed: none

Paul's friends), there is no doubt that the idea of joy is a central theme of the letter and an attitude Paul wants the Philippians to adopt.

Within the letter of Philippians is an emphasis to imitate Christ (2.1-11—the great Christ Hymn), and Paul also indicates the importance of imitating two co-workers (Timothy and Epaphroditus (2.19-30)). Finally, there is a plea to imitate the life of Paul (3.1-21). It is within this context that we see Paul write a direct exhortation to these people to rejoice. Not just rejoice, but rejoice because you have no need to be anxious. (Don't miss this! If anyone should have a right to say they are anxious, I think it would be an imprisoned Paul!)

Paul closes his letter telling the people of Philippi that he knows what it is to be in need and to have plenty, to be well fed and to be hungry. In any situation, however, he is able to continue in his faith and full of joy. Philippians 4.13 has often been used to motivate us to get through a struggle. It almost becomes a pre-game, fire-you-up-for-the-battle kind of verse. In reality, it is the response to the struggle. Paul does not have to get fired-up to overcome because whatever situation he is in, he is ready to face it.

Preparing for the Group Time:

How much joy do you have in your life? Why do you answer the way that you do?

I don't pretend to know each and every circumstance you face, but I do know that I often hear—and more importantly, experience—a sense of frustration and distraction based on the “troubles” in my life. I say “troubles” because I can promise you what I face is so much more dire than anything you face. (That last sentence was written in sarcasm font, by the way.) We tend to think our situations merit extra attention. Paul doesn't see it that way. Paul's instruction is for us to be full of joy in any and every situation.

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Text: Philippians 4.4-9

Lesson Outline:

Have your group describe the ideal retirement life for them. By retirement, we mean a time when there is no “work” that has to be done. Where they retire and what they do is completely up to them, and for the sake of our question, not constrained by any financial burdens.

Then ask your group to name what is different between their life of ideal retirement and their life now.

Go through the discussion questions.

Close with a time of prayer asking God help us be people like Paul describes in Philippians 4.10-13, as described below.

Discussion Questions:

Summarize (or have your group collectively share) the end of Acts. How would you describe Paul’s life at this point?

If you were Paul and were going to write a letter to a group of believers, what do you think you would have told them, given the circumstances he was facing?

Read Philippians 4.4-9.

How does Paul’s words compare to what you would have told a church? Why the difference?

How important is joy in the life of a Christian? Why do we allow people to be grumpy if joy is such an important part of our Christian walk?

What things in your life prevent you from having joy? Or better stated, what things in your life do you allow to prevent you from having joy?

How can you take Paul’s words to heart and put into practice a life filled with joy? How can this group help you do so?

For the Children:

I think the same questions we ask the adults can be asked of our children. I think their answers may be different, but we may discover that children gravitate better towards joy. Also be sure to ask your children how parents can be more joyful. Let them teach us here.

Living the Story:

This week your assignment is to live a life of joy. Too often we allow things to get in the way of our really having joy. Unlike Paul, we are not content in every situation. To help us focus better on this, ask your group to write down the things that interrupt your joy this week. Whenever you feel stressed, whenever you snap at someone, or whenever you worry, write down what caused that.

I think this will do two things. One, just identifying the stress/worry will allow you to better address removing it. Second, I think it will help you see a pattern of the things that we see are really important to us. At the end of the week, evaluate your list. What things should have never been on the list? What are things that need to be addressed, but perhaps in a healthier manner than stress or worry?

Be prepared to share little next week how this experiment helped (or hindered) a life of joy.

Prayer Time:

I have mentioned a couple of times Paul's comment of Philippians 4.10-13. For me, these words are prescriptive—certainly not descriptive. I want us to use this passage as a basis for prayer this week. Pray it for the group. Either someone can do that for the entire or group, or even better, go around the circle and have each person pray that they be content in any and every circumstance.

Depending on the group, they may want to also mention the things they know in advance might get in the way of this happening. Ask God to help them address those things before they prevent contentedness.

Next Week:

Next week we will be discussing the end times, as seen in several New Testament texts: 1 Corinthians 16.21-24; 1 Thessalonians 3.11-5.11; 2 Peter 3.1-16, and Revelation. These can be found in *The Story* chapter 31.