

A STUDY OF THE PRISON EPISTLES

THE CHOICE

"I believe happiness is a choice. Some days it is a very difficult choice." Steve Gleason played safety for the New Orleans Saints, best known for blocking a punt in the first quarter of the first game played back in New Orleans in nearly 2 years due to Hurricane Katrina. A statue commemorates that moment outside of the Superdome. Gleason inspired a devastated city with a blocked punt, but he has inspired countless others fighting for his life in a battle against ALS.

ALS is an incurable, terminal disease in the nervous system leading to muscle weakness and eventually loss of control. People know Gleason for his positivity, but as he said, it's a tough choice.

Everyone faces situations that cause us to want to give up. Some of you may have injuries or dramatic diagnoses like Gleason. Others have overcome trials and turmoil. All of us at one point or another will know the stress and strain of busy lives, pressures, and demands that grind us up over time. While I agree with Gleason that happiness is a choice we make, I realize that joy runs deeper. Joy comes only from the Lord. And sitting in a Roman prison, thinking about his friends and supporters in Philippi, Paul became so overwhelmed by joy that he picked up a pen and wrote a letter.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

¹ From Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ I always pray with joy in my every prayer for all of you ⁵ because of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ For I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel all of you became partners in God's grace together with me. ⁸ For God is my witness that I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And I pray this, that your love may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight ¹⁰ so that you can decide what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In our passage today, similar to many places in Paul's writing, we see Paul bust into spontaneous prayer. In verse 3, he thanks God every time they come to mind. In verse 4, we see his prayer spring forth from joy. Paul is a great model for prayer.

Often times we over-complicate prayer. It's just talking to God. However, scan the QR code to the right for a little more help by using the ACTS prayer model. Plus, this article has links to several other questions on prayer.



DISCUSSION

What is the difference between happiness and joy?
Why does it matter?

1. What prompts Paul's thankfulness and what does he do about it? (3-4)

2. What will Christ do with the "good work" he has begun? (6)

3. What does Paul pray for regarding the following:

-Their love (9a)

-Their knowledge and insight (9b)

-Their decisions (10)

-Their righteousness (11)

4. Based on what you see in this passage, where does Paul find joy and what verses illustrate that?

5. What steps can you take to join Paul in finding joy through seeing people love and grow in Christ?

Perhaps you've struggled with disunity and frustration and haven't experienced the unity and joy we've discussed. If that's the case, talk to your coach today.

ICEBREAKER

OBSERVATION

INTERPRETATION

APPLICATION

STUDY NOTES

THE BLAME GAME

The year 2020 has brought to light all the family drama that had been brewing in America for decades—centuries even. Attack from the outside like on September 11th, 2001 gets a nation or team, but hardly anything devastates like attack from within.

It doesn't matter if it's a nation or a little league team—when things go bad, everyone starts looking for someone to blame. Often, public figures fuel the fire by blaming others so that they can be perceived as the solution. 2020 became an infomercial inventing problems you didn't know to worry about and offering solutions you didn't know you needed. However, any solution this world has to offer is temporary.

Disunity didn't begin in 2020, it began way back in a garden in Genesis 3. True unity, however, became a possibility when Christ defeated sin on the Cross. In Christ, we're called to be more than we could ever be on our own—we just have to receive it.

UNITY WITH OTHERS REQUIRES GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Paul uses several key terms that, if we're not careful, we're prone to overlook. First, Paul refers to he and Timothy and "**slaves of Christ Jesus**." The word "slave" hits hard within the context of current racial tensions—and rightly so. Paul used a word meaning bond-servant, and although it wasn't based on the color of skin, it was no less demeaning. Bond-servants were the lowest household servants. For Paul to refer to himself in this way reflected his humility and mission. He was not his own master, completely subject to the will of God.

The second term Paul used described the Philippians as **saints in Christ Jesus**. The Philippians were great people. Paul even referred to them as **partners**. However, they weren't "saints" because of *their* greatness. Paul also used the same word to refer to the Christians in the book of 1st Corinthians, who, in a side by side comparison, make most of us look pretty righteous. Although "saints" often brings to mind old dead men and women who did great things, that's not how Paul used the term. It means "set-apart," and is much less about what *we* do, than what Christ does *in* and *through* us. Paul praised the Philippians for their **participation in the gospel from the first day until now**. However, they were "saints" because **the one who began a good work... will perfect it**.

Third, Paul wished the Philippian Christians **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!** Again, we might just

look at this as a nice thing to say. For Paul, however, "grace" and "peace" weren't just a nice greeting, they're two major components that a Christian receives when coming into a relationship with God through Jesus. We are saved from an eternity in Hell, **by grace through faith** creating peace (see Ephesians 2). Grace is all over the place in this study and we'll talk about it a lot, but for now the simple definition is "underserved favor;" that is, "getting something we don't deserve."

Paul as a "bond-servant," and the Philippians as "saints" and experiencers of "grace and peace," find those identities and qualities in the gospel. "Gospel" means "good news" and refers specifically to the fact that Jesus came to earth—God in the flesh—to redeem humanity from sin. He did for us what we *could not* do for ourselves, even worse, what we didn't *want to* do for ourselves (that's grace). Paul endured **imprisonment in the defense of the gospel**, but that suffering brought **confirmation** of its truth. Paul suffered with **the affection of Christ Jesus**—who brought salvation by violence heaped upon him through the cross.

GOD SEES OUR HEARTS

Based on the gospel, Paul prayed that **love may abound even more**—that every day you would set a new personal best in loving God and others. He prayed for **knowledge and every kind of insight** to discern **what is best**. This isn't just information. You can't google "knowledge" and "discernment" and hope to get what you need to live **sincere and blameless**. We have more access to information in our smartphones than any previous generation, but that does not lead to **the fruit of righteousness—that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God**.

Consider the terms Paul used today and we realize, God calls us to a high standard—saints, perfection, blameless, righteousness. If we consider that each of those terms is a requirement to spend eternity with God, all of us assume that we're going to the other place. However, through grace and God's **good work**, those are not qualities we pursue, but receive.

Imagine playing a golf scramble and Jesus is your partner—whoever has the best shot is where you as a team land. You may be shooting well, you may shoot poorly, but Jesus never fails to hit a hole in one. You've hit in the rough, in the woods, in sand traps, and you might have even broken a window, but your score at the end of 18 holes is 18. When God looks at Christians, he sees Christ in all his perfection and glory. The high standard we cannot achieve is achieved for us simply by asking to join Jesus' team.