

KNOW JOY

NO MATTER WHAT

WEEK 3 GROUP GUIDE | MESSAGE BY ERIC PARKS

START

To get things started, let's go around the circle and answer this question: **Who are you?**

SHARE

Look around; life has its ups and downs. We can all agree that some days are better than others.

Some days are just terrific ... the sun is shining, we get that front parking spot, that relationship is getting better, our favorite show is coming on and we have no distractions, the boss tells us we are doing a great job, we have on a pair of new shoes and our kids go to bed without a hassle. These are those things that can make us feel happy. Then there are those difficult days, where it's raining and you have to park a football field away from the mall, you get that irritating text about a situation that is out of your control, maybe that health set-back just continues to get worse, that relationship just continues to be an outright pain, and that area of your life you felt was getting better just got worse. These are the difficulties that can make us feel down and frustrated.

Now imagine, whether life is good and the sun is shining or life is difficult and unrelenting ... that you have an incredible strength on the inside that doesn't waiver. You have this secret weapon called "joy." Joy is not dependent on a new pair of shoes or a raise at work. Joy does not shrivel up when we experience the hardships of life. This kind of inner strength comes from God alone. In Nehemiah 8:10 it says, "... the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Throughout this series, we are going to look at what it means to "Know Joy," no matter what. No matter what happens in life, we can truly know joy at all times. As a church, we are going to walk through the book of Philippians. We are going to get to know the Apostle Paul and listen to what God has to say to us about living a life with a true inner joy.

This week we continue in our series on Philippians as we talk about what really defines each of us. If you are the least bit human, you most likely struggled with the opening question ... who are you? Most likely, many of us answered with our job titles or what we do – such as teacher, financial advisor, server, trades person, dad, mom, sister, brother, etc. Many of us probably used adjectives that help identify what we do, such as hard worker, dedicated, resilient, or committed. Ultimately, God defines us by who we are in his eyes. It is not dependent on anything we do, but who we already are. Because we are defined already, that means there is nothing we can attain or do to make us more loved. Since this is the truth about each of us who know Jesus, we can have an unshakeable joy.

Although we are in the book of Philippians, let's take a look at a few other letters Paul wrote addressing what is most important about our faith and we will begin to see a persistent theme.

Let's read Ephesians 3:14-21

We are already “rooted and established in love,” so why is it so hard to grasp God's love for us? What stands in the way of receiving God's love for us?

According to verse 20, where is God's power at work? Why is this so crucial to understand if we are to become the people we were designed to become?

GROW

Throughout Philippians, Paul talks about this unshakeable joy that we all can have access to. Eric quoted the writer and theologian Dallas Willard when he described joy...

“Joy is not pleasure, a mere sensation, but a pervasive and constant sense of well-being.”

This is such a great definition for those who struggle with the notion of joy. It is a constant sense of well-being. That no matter what you are going through or where you are going through it; you can have this perfect peace and well-being that only God can give you. As we discussed and read earlier, we are already rooted and established in love; we just need to remind ourselves.

Read Romans 8:38-39

R.H Mounce, in *The New American Commentary on Romans*, talks about how powerful it is to truly know the truth about God's love for us:

The final two verses of chap. 8 call for reflection rather than for interpretation. They supply the climax of Paul's inspired and eloquent words of praise to the love of God. The apostle voiced his confidence that there is nothing that could separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. His list of ten terms moves from physical danger through the hierarchy of superhuman powers, those that now exist or ever will, powers from on high or from below, and culminates in the inclusive phrase “anything else in God's whole world” (Phillips).²¹³ There is absolutely nothing that can ever drive a wedge between the children of God and their Heavenly Father. It is true that life contains its full share of hardships (v. 18). But God is at work in all the circumstances of life to conform those whom he has chosen into the likeness of his dear Son. The process is God's. We are his workmanship (Eph 2:10). The process of sanctification is intended to bring us into conformity with the nature of our Creator. Although it may at times involve some serious pruning (John 15:2; cf. Heb 12:5-11), we may be sure that love is at work on our behalf. We are forever united with the one who is perfect love.

There is absolutely nothing that can drive a wedge between God and his love for us. That means we can be completely confident of that love, no guesswork or playing games to earn God's approval. We can rest in this “constant sense of well-being” that truly defines the state of joy.

For you personally, what can make you feel separated from the love of God?

When you feel separated, what changes take place in your lifestyle or how do you act differently?

MOVE

You've heard of the term "vicious cycle" before. A **vicious cycle** is defined as *a sequence of reciprocal cause and effect in which two or more elements intensify and aggravate each other, leading inexorably to a worsening of the situation.*

When we don't trust the love of God, one of the games we like to play with God is behavior modification. This game is not only an exhausting cycle, but it never brings any peace or joy, it only makes the situation worse. For instance, let's say you mess up and sin in an area you thought you had under control. Because you believe that God's love is dependent on how you act, then you sadly believe that God no longer loves you or loves you less. Because of this, you knuckle down and promise God and yourself that you will never do that again. By an act of sheer will, you go a week or two and feel cleaned up enough to approach God once more. By this time you have worked so hard at behavior modification, you have not allowed God's love to saturate your heart. Your behavior has changed, but not your heart. Eventually your will can't sustain this, you fall and then repeat the vicious cycle of earning God's love. After a few cycles of this, we feel hopeless and throw in the towel on the whole God thing.

The reality is that if we have gotten to the end of our rope with behavior modification, that is a good and healthy place to be. At the end of everyone's rope there is a loving God waiting to catch us. Only God can change our hearts. Our job is to forget about the past, forget about the falls and keep our eyes focused on Jesus and who He says we are. Paul continually emphasized this, and given his marred and dark past he wrote with conviction.

Philippians 3:13-14

No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.

Would you say you are more apt to rely on "behavior modification" or leaning into the love of God?

What does it mean to you, to let go of trying to control your behaviors, thoughts, and actions?

What is one of the main hang-ups for you that holds you back from accepting God's love? How can those around you help you or encourage you best?

PRAY

As a group, spend some time praying for each other and the struggles that we all face. If you are in a co-ed group, consider breaking up into men and women's groups to talk more freely.

TO GO

Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."