

Discussion Guide

Philippians 1:1-11 "Surprised by Joy"

1. Paul writes this letter with more joy-language than any other letter in the New Testament while he's in prison, chained to a guard, cut off from the people and the justice he loves. What's striking about that pairing?
2. In verses 3–5 Paul's joy isn't abstract gratitude, it's rooted in specific people he can name and remember in detail. Who is someone specific, not a category of people, who has been a real source of joy to you?
3. Bobby used the image from Perelandra of a fruit withheld versus a fruit given. How we can be so fixated on what's withheld that we fail to taste what's actually been given. What's a "fruit withheld" in your life right now that tends to pull your attention away from what's in front of you?
4. In verse 6, Paul is confident that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion," even though nothing around him looks like it's working out. Where do you need that kind of confidence right now, about your own life, or about someone you love?
5. Paul calls this ragtag group of former slaves, jailers, and wealthy merchants "saints" or "holy ones" naming them by their future rather than their present. Is there someone in your life you find it hard to see as anything other than who they currently are, or have been? What would it look like to name them by who they're becoming?
6. Paul is literally chained to his oppressor and still isn't preoccupied with resentment. Where in your life has or is there a chain, a wound, a betrayal, a fear, that keeps pulling your attention away from the people God has actually put in front of you?
7. Chesterton says Jesus kept his joy hidden, like a secret too great to release all at once. Where have you learned to keep joy contained, maybe because it felt inappropriate given the pain around you? What would it look like to let some of it out?
8. In Leaf by Niggle, all an artist manages to finish painting in his lifetime is one leaf of the tree he envisioned, and only in the next life does he see the whole forest. Where do you feel like you're only contributing "a leaf" (to a marriage, a kid, a friendship, a ministry, ...) and struggling to trust there's a bigger tree?
9. Bobby's friend on her walk in the woods chose to say yes to "a God who is generous and bountiful" even while grieving what had been withheld. Who's one person you could invest in this week, sitting with them the way Paul sat with the Philippians in his memory, as an act of saying yes to what's given?