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Grounders:

Paul wrote his letter to the church that he helped found in Philippi with the theme of joy amidst suffering. That's right; it is possible to experience joy even when we suffer. The opposite of joy is despair (anxiety or sorrow), our typical response to suffering.

Identify the area in your life where you are experiencing despair, and ask three questions. First, are you inward focused? Second, are you going through it alone? Third, are you allowing God to use your despair for ministry to others? Your answers are most likely, "Yes," "Yes," and "No." In the first eleven verses of Philippians, Paul introduces us to a paradigm shift from despair to joy amidst suffering.

First, Paul demonstrates that *joy begins with humility* (Phil. 1:1-2). Notice that Paul refers to himself as a servant of Christ. Paul communicates the countercultural theme that he is a servant...by choice. Consequently, any suffering will be seen through the eyes of a servant, eyes that refocus from inward to outward. This week, continually recite, "I'm a servant of Christ." Bend the knees of your heart to Him, and watch your despair begin to be transformed into joy.

Second, Paul tells us that *joy grows in community* (Phil. 1:3-8). Paul's reason for joy is the church's partnership for the gospel (1:4-5). This means that they had surrendered all of their resources for the cause of Christ. Joy was perpetuated by Paul's confidence that God, who began a good work (salvation) in the church, would complete it. This week, rather than going it alone, share your burdens with another person and discover how they can be divided. At the same time, tell him your joys and watch them be multiplied.

Third, Paul informs us that *joy prays for ministry* (Phil. 1:9-11). Paul's prayer request is that love will abound more and more through experience and intimacy so that the church will be *sincere*, literally judged by the light. "Sincere" meant that pottery or marble was the same all the way through. Potters and marble cutters would cover flaws with wax. The only way that their pieces were either proved genuine or full of wax was to be held to the light. When we pray for ministry, that God will use our suffering to draw others to Him, our despair is transformed into joy. Consequently, His light shines through our lives so that we reflect Christ's image.

As we humble our hearts as servants of Christ, sharing our burdens, and praying that God will use them to for the advancement of His kingdom, our despair will be transformed into joy. This week alone, we heard that God used Common Ground to save a life from suicide, save another for eternity, free one from the prison of withholding forgiveness, and further another's journey toward full surrender. He who began a good work in us is completing it. Rejoice!

In Him,
Mitch