

CONTENTS

1	Individual Community <i>Philippians 1:1-11; 2:14-18; 4:1-9</i>	5
2	Joyful Suffering <i>Philippians 1:12-30</i>	11
3	Free Slave <i>Philippians 2:1-13</i>	16
4	Downward Ascent <i>Philippians 3:10-21</i>	22

SESSION ONE

Philippians
1:1-11; 2:14-18;
4:1-9

Learner Session Guide



Focus Statement

Whether in joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, an individual in Christian community does not rejoice in private or suffer alone.

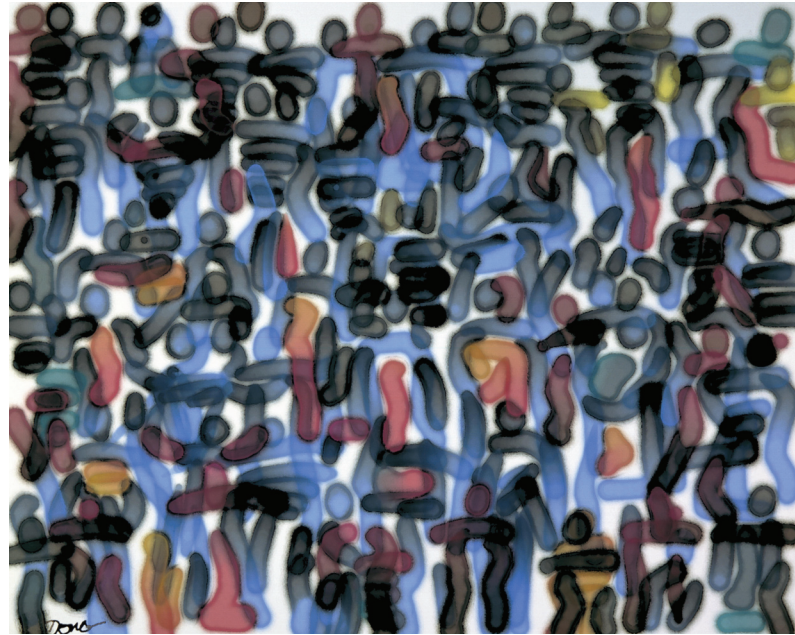


Key Verse

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. **Philippians 1:3-5**

Individual Community

 **Focus Image**



Watercolored Figures, 1999, Diana Ong (b.1940/Chinese-American). © Diana Ong / SuperStock

Gather

Check-in

Take a few moments to introduce yourself to others or reconnect as a group.

Pray

God in heaven, open us to what we learn from Scripture and from one another today. Speak to us as individuals and as a small community of faith. As unique persons and as a group, strengthen us in faith through Paul's encouraging words to the first-century Philippians. Amen.

Focus Activity

Reflect on the Focus Image. List some benefits and challenges of being an individual in a community.

SESSION ONE



Notes

Open Scripture

Read Philippians 1:1-11; 2:14-18; 4:1-9.

- What words or phrases are particularly interesting to you?
- What surprises you?
- What questions do you have?

Join the Conversation

Historical Context

1. Paul, the writer of Philippians, was raised and educated in the Jewish faith. Early in his life, he persecuted followers of Jesus, but he became a missionary after the risen Christ appeared to him (Acts 9). He visited the modest but prosperous city of Philippi in 49 or 50 C.E. The first European city in which Paul preached, Philippi was located along the main road to Rome, the *Via Egnatia* (the ancient world's version of "Route 66"). Paul was in Troas when he received a vision and plea for him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-12).

- On the map below, locate Troas (Troy), an ancient city in Mysia, and Philippi, an ancient city in Macedonia.
- Read Acts 16:4-12 and discuss what or who directed Paul and Timothy on this journey. At a time when travel was slow and difficult, what might have motivated them to continue traveling?

2. The city of Philippi was not only located within the Roman Empire, it was founded and settled by Roman soldiers. In the Roman Empire there was no freedom of choice, and honorable people did not deviate from the norms of society—or even desire to do this. People thought of themselves in terms of group identity, not individual identity. This meant that an individual's dishonorable actions also dishonored the person's family, clan, town, and so on, and therefore were considered



shameful. Jews were seen as “rebellious children” by the Roman Empire, and followers of Jesus were largely viewed in the same way.

- Why would it have been “shameful” for Christians in Philippi to be in disagreement with one another? What might have happened if these disagreements became public?
- Review Philippians 2:14-18 and 4:1-9, and list words and phrases that encourage the people to conduct themselves “honorably.”

Literary Context

1. Philippians is a letter from Paul to the community of faith in Philippi. Like most letters, it begins with a salutation or greeting. Paul’s letters generally include a section of thanksgiving as well.

- Read Philippians 1:1-11 and identify the salutation and thanksgiving sections. What are the reasons for Paul’s joy and thanksgiving?
- All of the letters in the New Testament were originally written in *koiné* (common) Greek, a form of the language known and used by most people in the Roman Empire. Greek letters typically had three goals: to confirm the relationship between writer and

SESSION ONE



Notes

receiver, to strengthen that relationship, and to exchange ideas and conversation. Review Philippians 1:1-11; 2:14-18; and 4:1-9, and discuss whether Paul's letter fits with these goals. How would you describe the relationship between Paul and the Philippians?

2. A key theme in Philippians is the mutual joy of community in Christ. This community is established in God's ongoing work and promise through Christ's death and resurrection and joins in the mission of sharing the gospel. Paul introduces and reinforces the theme of mutual joy in community by repeating the Greek word *koinonia*, which refers to a partnership, sharing, participation, and common life together.

- Read Philippians 1:3-6; 2:1-2; 3:8-10; and 4:15-16, and note how *koinonia* is described in each passage. What similarities and differences do you see?

3. Near the end of the letter, Paul singles out two women in the community, Euodia and Syntyche. Because Paul mentions very few people by name in his letters, it seems that these women are prominent people in the community. Paul writes that they are his coworkers, along with Clement and others.

- Review Philippians 4:2-3. Considering the importance of group identity in the Roman Empire, what might it mean to be involved in a public disagreement within your church? Would having your name mentioned in a letter like this be a blessing or a burden? Why do you think Paul does this?

Lutheran Context

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian and a participant in the resistance to Nazism. Reflecting on Bonhoeffer's writings, Robert Coles states that "Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in which we may participate" (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Modern Spiritual Masters Series [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998], p. 73).

- Community isn't something we create or pursue. It is a gift and reality created and built by God. What do you think about this? What might this mean for differences of opinion or disagreements within the community?

2. In Baptism, God is present and at work both in the individual and the community. The individual is joined to Christ and his death and resurrection *and* joined to the body of Christ—the church, the community of faith. We say to the newly baptized person, "We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world" (*ELW*, p. 231).

- Write a prayer of thanks for Baptism and for God’s presence and work in your life and in the life of your faith community.

3. A *paradox* exists when two seemingly opposite things are at work at the same time or appear in the same statement. Martin Luther talked about paradoxes such as law and gospel and saint and sinner.

- In your own words, how would you explain the paradox in this session’s title: Individual Community?

Devotional Context

1. The focus was on community, rather than the individual, in Paul’s day. Today, sociologist Robert N. Bellah says that “community” has largely been obliterated, to the extent that individualism is “at the very core” of North American culture (*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], p. 142).

- What do you think about Bellah’s claim? List a few examples of individualism in North American culture.
- How has individualism impacted your life, family, congregation, community, and the nation in positive and negative ways?

2. Part of experiencing mutual joy in community includes sharing joys and concerns with each other. Tell about a time when life shared in community increased your joy or eased your pain.

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

Holy God, creator of individuals and communities, be with us this week as we reflect on what we have learned here. Thank you for the gift of our individual selves and for the gift of Christian community. Hear the joys and concerns we share within this community. (Include prayer requests here.) Help us to support each other and the body of Christ, even when we disagree. All these things we ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.



Notes



Notes

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Philippians 1:12-30.
2. Think about the many individuals who make up the communities you are involved in (your family, congregation, place of employment, and so on). During the week, observe how these individuals function within or on the margins of these communities, and seek small and kind ways to reach out to those on the margins. Pray that God will strengthen these communities.
3. Visit the Book of Faith Web site at www.bookoffaith.org. Consider creating or joining an online discussion for conversation on Philippians.

Enrichment

1. Listen and look for an example of the mutual joy of community in Christ. If possible, "capture" this example in a journal, photo, or sketch.
2. Visit the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) Web site at www.elca.org. Under the headings "What We Believe" and then "Social Issues," the site contains many statements that address how the ELCA seeks to care for others by addressing social issues. Choose a topic, read the statement or policy, and consider reporting back to the group on what you learn.

For Further Reading

Available at www.augsburgfortress.org/store:

Deeply Woven Roots: Improving the Quality of Life in Your Community by Gary R. Gunderson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Congregations can make a profound difference in the struggle against problems such as violence, substance abuse, poverty, and alienating individualism. Gunderson provides a model for improving not only the health of congregations, but the health of the surrounding communities.

Life among the Lutherans by Garrison Keillor (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2009). This is a charming collection of stories, from a master storyteller, of life in Lutheran community.

Signs of Belonging: Luther's Marks of the Church and the Christian Life by Mary E. Hinkle (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). Luther's teaching on the seven marks of the church defines the community of Christ, and at the same time connects with individual Christians.

