



## WEEKLY LEADER GUIDE

# STORY OF MY LIFE

WEEK 2

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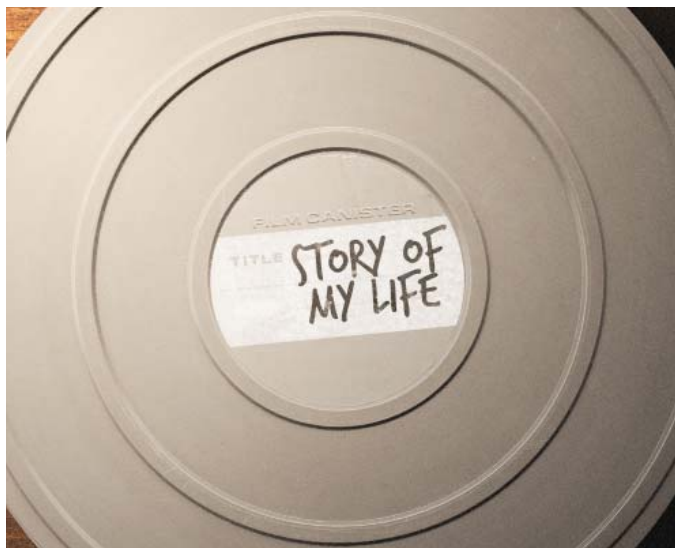
# Story of My Life

## WEEK 2



### WEEK SUMMARY

As we learned in the first week of this series, one of the main problems with happiness is that it's extremely fickle. It's slippery. One moment happiness is all ours, and the next, it's gone. Happiness is so slippery because it depends on circumstances—it's in and out of our grasp as our lives journey up and down. Happiness can't stand up to life's challenging circumstances. Thankfully, Jesus offers us something much better than mere happiness—He offers us joy. While happiness depends on circumstances, joy transcends them. While happiness is chained to our external circumstances, joy is rooted inside of us. And we can find joy by focusing on something other than our circumstances—by focusing on Jesus and His Kingdom. Living in joy isn't just a perspective change—it's a reality change.



### THINK ABOUT THIS

Members of your small group should feel comfortable enough to open up and talk about difficult circumstances they've experienced. Make sure everyone in your group knows that small group is a safe place to share difficulties without being judged or treated differently. This idea of having a judgment-free zone might be new to some in your group, and it's something you should remind them of regularly. For the first several meetings, it's helpful to remind everyone that small group is a safe place.

If the idea of a safe place doesn't encourage others to share, be the first one to open up. As the group leader, it's important to lead through active listening, but also set the example by sharing yourself. Once one person shares, everyone will feel more comfortable. Then, when everyone realizes they can share freely with the others in the group, your small group will have become a safe place.

#### TEACHING MATERIALS



VIDEO AND AUDIO FILES AVAILABLE  
IN YOUR SERIES FOLDER ONLINE

# Story of My Life

WEEK 2



BOTTOM LINE

**HAPPINESS DEPENDS ON CIRCUMSTANCES.  
JOY TRANSCENDS THEM.**

**Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.**

2 CORINTHIANS 6:10 NLT

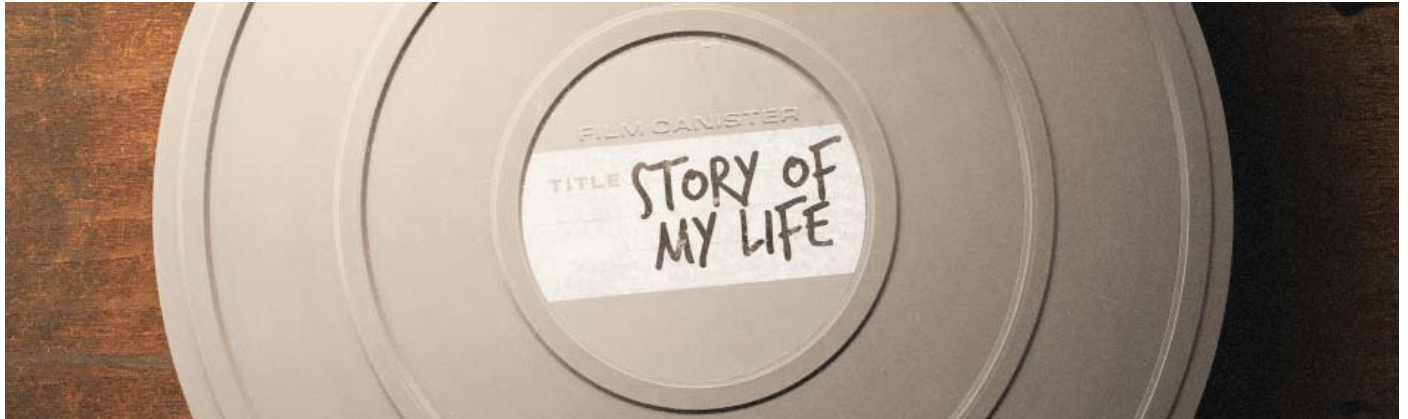
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are a guide to get the conversation started in your group—don't feel like you need to ask everything you see here! As long as you're having a conversation, you're on the right track. Also, feel free to adjust the questions to fit the needs of your specific group.

1. WHEN YOU WERE A KID, WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST FEAR? HOW ARE YOUR FEARS DIFFERENT NOW THAT YOU'RE AN ADULT? HOW ARE THEY THE SAME?
2. HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED A CIRCUMSTANCE THAT SEEMED TO JUSTIFY YOUR FEARS?
3. HOW IS YOUR FAITH OR TRUST IN GOD AFFECTED BY YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES (GOOD AND BAD)?
4. WHAT DO YOU THINK THE APOSTLE PAUL DID OR EXPERIENCED THAT ALLOWED HIM TO HAVE JOY EVEN IN THE MOST PAINFUL CIRCUMSTANCES?
5. HAVE YOU EVER KNOWN SOMEONE WHO, LIKE PAUL, EXPERIENCED TOUGH TIMES BUT WHOSE FAITH SEEMED UNSHAKEABLE? WHO WAS IT? AND, WHAT MADE THEM ABLE TO EXPERIENCE JOY IN TOUGH TIMES?
6. IF YOU KNEW YOU COULD TRUST GOD NO MATTER WHAT, HOW WOULD THAT CHANGE THE WAY YOU SEE YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES?
7. WHAT'S ONE TIME YOU REMEMBER GOD COMING THROUGH FOR YOU IN THE PAST? HOW CAN IT HELP YOU TO HANG ONTO THAT MEMORY WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGE IN THE FUTURE?

# Communication Plan

## WEEK 2



### CONTINUING THE EXPERIENCE

Do you ever wish you could strategically communicate with your small group outside of group time? Ever wish you could find a way to share quick snippets of what they're learning or even send a word of encouragement to them?

Well . . . now you can.

The communication plan is designed to help your small group attenders engage with the truths in that week's group time. Below you'll find bite-size content that you can send through

email or post on social media for your group members to see. There are posts for Facebook and Instagram, and images that you can use. And they're all designed to help your attenders connect with the week's topic.

Remember to make these posts yours. Don't feel like you have to use all of the content provided in a given series. Use this plan as a starting point as you leverage technology with your small group.

### TEXT MESSAGES

#### SEND THIS TO EVERYONE IN YOUR GROUP:

Hi! Hope this week is going great! Just wanted to check in and let you know that I'm praying that God would help you to live in His joy! You're being prayed for!

#### SEND THIS TO ANYONE WHO MISSED GROUP THIS WEEK:

*(Leader: You can find the audio file in your downloads. Use a service like Google Drive or Dropbox to share it.)*

Hey—we missed you at group! Here's the link to the audio so you can catch up. Hope all is well and can't wait to see you next week!

#### SEND THIS TO ONE OR TWO PEOPLE IN YOUR GROUP, JUST BECAUSE:

Hi! Just checking in. Are there any ways that I can pray for you this week?

### SOCIAL MEDIA

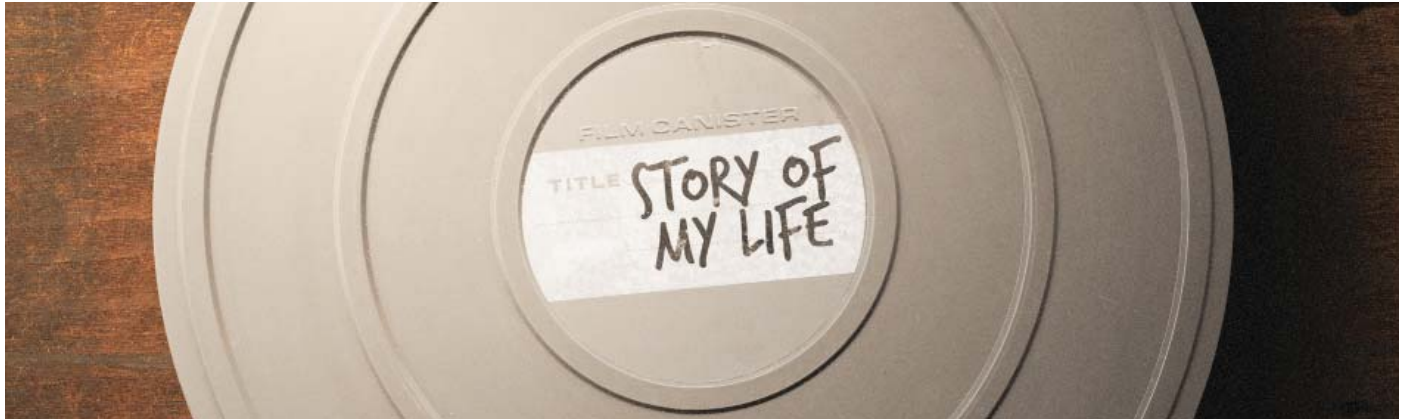
#### POST THIS TO YOUR FACEBOOK OR INSTAGRAM:



This week in our series *Story of My Life*, we talked about the difference between slippery happiness and stable joy. Can't wait for next week as we keep diving into what Jesus meant when He said He wants us to live a better story!

# Weekly Email

## WEEK 2



### FOR THE LEADER

Remember to email your small group every week with a reminder of when small group meets, directions, and any information that would be helpful for them. To make it simple, just **copy and paste the email below** and fill in any

information that you think your group members might need to know. Since every group and leader is different, feel free to change the email text to fit your group.

### WEEK 2 EMAIL

Hey everyone!

Hope you all are having a great week! I wanted to send out a quick email to let everyone know what we'll be talking about in small group this week.

We're in the second week of *Story of My Life*. The **bottom line** of this week's topic is happiness depends on circumstances, joy transcends them. This week in small group, we're going to talk about the difference between happiness and joy and how we can live in joy even when situations in our lives are really, really tough. I'm looking forward to our time together!

Here are the details for our meeting:

Date/time:

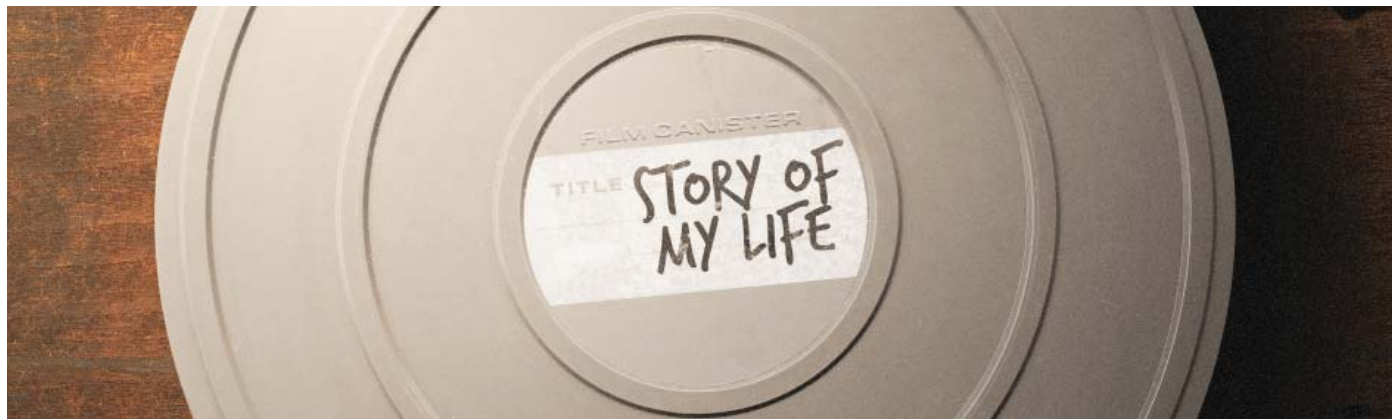
Address:

Our weekly Bible Reading Plan and the questions for this week are attached.

See you soon!

# Bible Reading Plan

## WEEK 2



### OVERVIEW

Wouldn't it be awesome if you could help your small group members engage with God's Word all week long, instead of just during your weekly small group time? That's the intention of the Bible Reading Plan that goes along with this series.

Every week of a series comes with five unique verses and five unique prompts to help your small group members think about and engage with Scripture throughout the week. Each Scripture image can be found in the "Graphics" folder of the series download and each prompt can be found below.

### HOW TO USE

We've designed these images and prompts to be flexible enough to use in a wide variety of ways. But to help you get started, here are three things you might want to try:

- 1. POST THEM.** These images and prompts work perfectly on social media!
- 2. TEXT THEM.** If you're looking for a more personal way to encourage your group members to read Scripture, try texting

each day's Scripture and prompt to the group. Of course, we're all busy. So to save time, you may want to sign up for an online texting service and schedule those in advance.

- 3. PRINT OR EMAIL THEM.** An easy way to have your group use the Bible Reading Plan is to simply print or email the next page. That way they have each day's reading before the week begins.

### DAILY SCRIPTURE

#### MONDAY (Day 1) James 1:2-3

*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance."*

#### TUESDAY (Day 2) Isaiah 26:3

*"You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you."*

#### WEDNESDAY (Day 3) John 14:27

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

#### THURSDAY (Day 4) Romans 8:38-39

*"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

#### FRIDAY (Day 5) Psalm 30:5

*"Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."*



# Daily Scripture Images & Devotions



## WEEK 2

### DAY 1:



It can be difficult to view trials from God’s perspective. We know that trials can strengthen our character and solidify our faith, but when you’re in the middle of a tough situation, the last thing we’re thinking about is how grateful we are for that growth opportunity. In most of those situations, if we’re being honest, we have a tendency to become bitter and frustrated with God. But this verse encourages us to consider those situations “pure joy.” In other words, it’s normal if this doesn’t come naturally, which is why we have to *choose* joy in those moments. Think back to the last time you went through a difficult time. Can you look back now and see how God lead you through it? Can you see now how you grew from that

experience? You see, the trials of our past remind us how strong and capable our God is lead us through difficult situations and grow us in the process. If you’re in the middle of a trial right now, ask God to help you change your perspective about the situation, replacing any feelings of bitterness and frustration with joy, hope, and perseverance.

### DAY 2:



We are constantly surrounded by noise. There are the obvious contributors, such as the news, screaming kids, advice-giving family members and friends, and work emails. But there are the sneakier ones, too: advertisements, the constant stream of content in the form of blogs and articles, and the seemingly perfect lives of our friends on social media. And as we absorb all of these things, they often end up shaping our thoughts and emotions—without us even realizing it. And more often than not, we end up feeling anxious and a little overwhelmed by it all. What’s more, these things take up so much brain space that they often leave little room for us to hear God’s voice. And if we’re not careful, before we know it, it’s been

ages since we’ve connected with God in a meaningful way. But this verse reminds us to **keep** our eyes on God because He is our constant source of comfort, peace, and clarity. The word “keep” implies that it will be a challenge, that things will likely pull our attention in other directions. Today, pray for God to increase your focus and equip you with the skills to turn down the noise so you can tune in to Him.

# Daily Scripture Images & Devotions



## WEEK 2

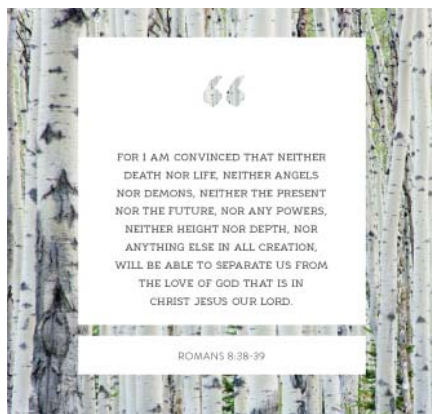
### DAY 3:



The fear of losing control is one of the main reasons we often have issues trusting others. When you choose to trust someone, you're intentionally assuming a position of vulnerability and opening yourself up to all sorts of possibilities—the possibility of being rejected, being hurt, and being misled. Trusting people is hard, and sometimes, trusting our invisible Heavenly Father is even harder. It's important, however, not to try to fit God into a human-sized box. *People* will disappoint you. But God is not like us in this way. He is perfect and always follows through on His promises. In other words, trust placed in God never has to worry about being rejected, hurt, or misled.

And, when we place our trust in Him, this verse says we have nothing to fear as He offers us His peace. So, is there anything keeping you from trusting God right now? If so, what is it? What are you afraid might happen? Pray about those things, asking God to help you overcome those barriers so that you can experience His peace.

### DAY 4:



There comes a time in everyone's life when they feel God is far away. Maybe that time is right now for you. And it's during these seasons when feelings of doubt, fear, loneliness, and rejection creep in. When you're in the middle of these moments, it's important to strongly counter these untruths with reminders of who God is. He is our Savior. He is mighty. He gives us the strength we need. He is strong in our weakest moments. He sees everything, past, present, and future. He is on our team. At your lowest moments, it might be difficult to remind yourself of God's power, especially when it doesn't feel like He's present at all. That's why it can also be helpful to establish some visual reminders in your home, in your car,

and in your workspace of all that He has done and what He is capable of doing. This could be encouraging verses (like today's verse) from the Bible or quick notes that remind you of something God has done for you in the past. Whatever it is, let those visual reminders sink into your mind and heart throughout the week. What you let into your mind and heart will become what you believe over time.



# Daily Scripture Images & Devotions



## WEEK 2

### DAY 5:



There's nothing quite like the day after a big thunderstorm. While there may be downed trees and overturned patio furniture, there's an unmistakable vibrancy to the trees and sky as nature gets a "reset" the next morning. Oftentimes, this is the way life and faith goes, too. Perhaps you're in the midst of a personal storm right now. Perhaps you're in the middle of a difficult situation with your kids, with your job, or with your relatives. If so, here's a truth you can cling to: God promises an end to the troubles, and not only that, but celebration when the troubles are over! No matter what you've been through—or are going through right now—eventually the morning (a reset) will come. While this thought doesn't fix anything in the

moment, there's still something comforting about knowing that storms don't last forever. And when we look to God for help in those moments, He promises not only hold onto us, but also to plant our feet firmly on solid ground. Today, ask God to remind you of this truth the next time you find yourself in the middle of one of life's storms.

# Teaching Script

## WEEK 2

### BOTTOM LINE

# HAPPINESS DEPENDS ON CIRCUMSTANCES. JOY TRANSCENDS THEM.

### INTRODUCTION

Last week, we began a conversation about story, but not just any story. Your story. And we said that everyone in this room and everyone in our home and everyone in our community has one thing in common: When it comes to our life story, we all want a good one. And more specifically, whether we'd say it this way or not, we all want a *happy* one. No one walks around hoping for an unhappy story. Deep down, we all believe the more happiness we have, the better our life story will be.

We could probably list out several things that stand in the way of our happiness, but there's one in particular I think we could all agree on—fear. I recently read a *TIME* Magazine article\* that talked about how Americans are more fearful today than they've ever been in history. It seems we're afraid of everything. Terrorism, politics, national debt, germs, kids riding bikes without helmets, and maybe worst of all, our Internet going out. And according to this article, over 50 percent of our population deals with consistent and even constant fear.

Fear has become one of the most notable qualities about our modern culture. **But why is that?**

### TENSION

Well, for most of us, it comes down to one word: circumstances. We live in a culture where our happiness is deeply connected to our circumstances, our situations in life. Think about it. In your own life, what would make you happy right now? I'm guessing it has to do with your job, your school, your family life, your finances, or your health. And what has the greatest potential to make you unhappy right now? Same answer, right?

Our circumstances and our happiness are almost always connected. Maybe that's why . . .

### Some of us are afraid that our circumstances will change.

Maybe you've finally made it into your boss' favor. Maybe you're in a dating relationship where things are going well or you finally married "the one." Maybe your kids are on the right track and you're really happy about that. But isn't it true that when things are going our way, there's always a voice in the back of our minds asking, nagging, maybe even scaring us with the question: *What if this changes?*

### At the same time, some of us are afraid our circumstances won't change.

Maybe for you, things aren't going so well with your spouse, or you can't seem to find a spouse, or your financial situation keeps you up at night, or your kid isn't making the best decisions, or you can't seem to get traction in your career. We've all been in a place where we wished our circumstances were different. And when that happens, we find ourselves asking: *What if this never changes?*

Either way, we all want the same outcome. We all want good circumstances so we can be happy and our lives can tell a better story. But what other options do we have? If I want the story of my life to be a good one, and if you want the story of your life to be a good one, don't our circumstances have to line up to make that happen?

And it isn't just our happiness at stake. For every one of us, there's a strong—and often complicated—connection between our circumstances and our *faith*. Whether you'd consider yourself a Christian or not, when things go your way, it's easier to think that there is a God or that prayer works, or that God is good. But the challenge, of course, is that the opposite is also true. When things go the other way,

\*<http://time.com/4158007/american-fear-history/>

# Teaching Script

## WEEK 2



faith gets deflated leaving you to conclude that God isn't there or doesn't care or maybe isn't as good as you thought. Last week, we began talking about something Jesus said about our life stories in the Gospel of John, and we discovered that Jesus said He didn't come to steal our happiness or to kill our hopes for the future. It was just the opposite. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Another translation puts it this way, "My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life" (NLT).

This verse sounds like such good news when it comes to our circumstances, because experience has taught us that we have very little control over our circumstances in life. And if Jesus came so we could have a *rich and satisfying life*, doesn't that mean He will just arrange things to go our way?

Who *wouldn't* sign up for that?

But at the same time, if we're honest, something about that idea bothers us, too—the idea that following Jesus means He will ensure everything goes our way, that our lives are happy and healthy, and our circumstances are good. While that idea sounds fantastic, it raises a question in us.

Because we've all known someone for whom that wasn't true. We've all known Jesus-followers who didn't have great circumstances. **We've all known a good Christian in a tough situation.** We've all met someone who, despite following Jesus, despite serving in church, despite being kind and gracious and faithful and loving, fell on some really painful or difficult circumstances.

So then, what did Jesus mean when He said that we could have a full, rich, and satisfying life? Is that kind of life even possible when our circumstances don't seem to line up?

### TRUTH

It probably won't surprise you that we aren't the first culture to face this struggle. By all accounts, the first century was no easy place to live. Actually, in many places, it was a downright scary place to live—especially as a Jesus-follower. Christians in the first century were often persecuted relentlessly because of their faith. Every day they faced the possibility of beatings, imprisonment, and even death because of their allegiance to Jesus.

And the apostle Paul's life was no different. If anyone had reason to let emotions be dictated by circumstances—to live in fear because of what he was facing—it was Paul. But in a letter he wrote to a group of believers in the city of Corinth, Paul said something that I think was a game-changer for them. And it has the potential to change the way we see our own situation as well. He wrote this:

*In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food . . . We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed (2 Corinthians 6:4-5, 8-9 NLT).*

Paul laid out what many of us would consider the worst possible circumstances and the worst possible scenarios. He described having to endure troubles and hardships of every kind. He said they'd endured being beaten, imprisoned, and faced angry mobs. It would be hard to imagine more difficult or more fearful circumstances. And yet, despite his experiences—despite what he already endured and what he was likely to endure more of—Paul said the most incredible thing in the very next verse:

*Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything (2 Corinthians 6:10 NLT).*

Given the situations Paul described, those next sentences almost seem like a typo. Could you imagine that? Could you imagine being able to say those words despite being in the midst of the worst circumstances? Can you imagine that being your reality when things are going well and when you're right in the middle of . . .

- A tough situation at work?
- A painful time in your marriage?
- A difficult season with your kids?
- A scary situation with your health?
- A lonely time in your life?

Paul had joy in the midst of everything he was facing—financially, personally, professionally, physically. How is that even possible?

Paul told us. He didn't say he had happiness.

He had joy.

If you're anything like me, you're probably asking yourself, *aren't those the same thing?* Well, not exactly. Joy, unlike happiness, **doesn't depend on circumstances. It transcends them.** It exists apart of them, even in spite of them. Joy, unlike happiness, doesn't evaporate when life takes a curve—which is why it's so much more powerful.

# Teaching Script

## WEEK 2



### APPLICATION

So where does this leave you? For some of you, the struggle may be or feel as deep as Paul's—life or death. For others, it may be just a series of first-world problems. But regardless, your faith is connected to your perspective. Maybe one of the reasons is that when it comes to our circumstances, we feel so out-of-control. Sure, we can make certain choices that affect our outcomes in life, but for so many situations, for so many of our circumstances, it isn't up to us. You lost your job due to the economy. You had no control over the miscarriage. You can't make your teenager choose a different path. There are so many things that are out of your control, and they may cause you fear or a lack of peace.

Maybe that's why, more than anything else, our circumstances have the ability to really mess with our faith. Whether you're a Christian or not, and no matter how long you've been one, when our circumstances turn bad, we all have a knee-jerk reaction to distrust God. When our circumstances are good, it isn't really an issue, but when things turn sour, or when we worry they will, we all have a tendency to ask questions inwardly—tough questions about whether God is with us. And maybe more importantly, whether God is *for* us, whether He can be trusted with our story.

And I think this is where Paul understood something about God we may have missed. Having met Jesus face-to-face, Paul knew that the best way to know what God was really like was to look at Jesus. And, Jesus' love was so great that He was willing to die for Paul and for you and for me.

**So why can you find joy when things are hard? Because when Someone is willing to die for you, you can know that they are for you. When Someone gives up their life, you can trust that they love you.** And because of what Jesus did, Paul knew that God could be trusted, always.

For some of us, that's exactly what we needed to hear, believe, and ground our lives in today. That God is *for* us—whether or not our circumstances line up the way we want them to. And like Paul, it doesn't mean your circumstances will change. It doesn't mean they'll turn out how you want or stay the way you want, but it does mean you can have unshakeable joy and unshakeable peace in the middle of them.

**So what are you focused on today?** What circumstance or situation or relationship is taking up all the space in your brain right now? We all have one. Now, what would it look like for you to keep your eyes on Jesus and, even if it's just for today, trust God with that circumstance? How would trusting God change the way you think? How would trusting God change

the way you interact with others? How much less stress and how much more joy would you have if you could just change your focus for today and trust God?

To find joy today, change where you put your focus. Rather than focusing on the unknown, focus on what you do know. This week, I want to challenge you to try something new. Start your day in prayer—not just asking God for what you need, but also remembering how He has worked on your behalf in the past. As you talk with Him, thank Him for His promised presence and trust that He loves you and is for you.

That's what Jesus was talking about when He said: *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). Jesus wasn't talking about an easy life. Or an always-happy life. He was talking about a joy-filled life. One that, despite changing circumstances and even in the midst of hard circumstances, is rich and full and good.

### LANDING

Life going one way or another can cause us to forget who God is, what He has done, and what He has promised. Difficult circumstances will always tempt us to take our eyes off Jesus, to question Him, to keep our eyes on what's wrong with our circumstances, or to keep us living in fear of what could go wrong in our story. And so we need reminding of what's really true. We need to remember that God is for us and that He loves us. When we do, we'll find permanent and lasting joy regardless of the circumstances we're living in. And joy writes a better story than happiness ever could.

Imagine for a second if we all did this. Imagine if you and I had our minds so focused on Jesus that our circumstances didn't keep us in fear. How would it affect our spouses if our situations at work, while tough, didn't have the power to change our joy at home? What would it do for our kids if they saw a mom and dad who had unshakeable joy and steady peace, even in life's disappointments? What would happen if the world around us began to notice that we, the Jesus-followers, aren't people who claim the sky is falling every time the political or social or cultural climate changes, but see that we're people who are joyful in every circumstance? I think it would change the way they see us, and maybe even the way they see God.

Perhaps, as God continues to teach you and I how to find joy in the story of our lives, it will inspire those around us—maybe even those most important to us—to trust Him with the story of their lives as well.