

Rejoice Prayer

Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.

MOTHER TERESA

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

ACTS 13:52

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS JOY

Joy is a very physical feeling that fills up in us when all is well in our world. Two potent places of joy are at the altar when a couple pledges themselves to each other and in the birth room when a father or mother holds their newborn child for the first time. Sometimes we feel joy on Christmas morning, sometimes when a child kicks that goal on the soccer field and sometimes when we finally complete that marathon or lose the weight we wanted to lose. Joy is a universal human emotion of well-being and contentment. The Holy Spirit is associated with this feeling.

The Holy Spirit as joy calls us to a place of gratitude for all God has done on our behalf both for ourselves and our world. Prayer does not stop at the tomb. It begins with joy before a stone rolled away. Jesus' last prayer for his disciples was for them to know his joy (Jn 16:20-22). The Holy Spirit's indwelling presence reminds us of our great joy in Christ and calls us to a unity of peace. The fruit of the Spirit, the sign of the Spirit's work and presence in us, is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness" (Gal 5:22).

The primary occasion for joy in the Old Testament was God's saving acts and covenantal love. Joy was a sensation in the soul expressed during feast and worship celebrations that focused on one's devotion to God. Joy was a mark too of the eschatological expectation of God's final triumph and future glory. Joy in the New

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Testament occurred when God's kingdom flourished despite suffering and difficult times. Jesus linked joy with suffering and the coming of God's kingdom. Paul, on the other hand, linked joy to faith. The Greek word for joy is part of the family of words meaning "grace," "bless," "gift" and "thanksgiving."

In the New Testament:

- Joy is finding God's kingdom (Mt 13:44)
- Joy is witnessing the power of God's kingdom (Lk 10:17; 19:37)
- Joy is a sign of the kingdom of God (Rom 14:17)
- Joy occurs when people become believers (Lk 15:7; Acts 15:3)
- God's hope fills us with joy (Rom 15:13)
- Worshiping Christ gives us joy (Lk 24:52; Jn 3:29)
- Joy leads to generosity despite affliction (2 Cor 8:1-2)
- Joy is the result of love among believers (Phil 2:1-2)
- Joy occurs when we imitate Christ despite persecution (1 Thess 1:6)
- Joy comes when difficulties lead to spiritual maturity, a sign of the redemptive nature of our God (Jas 1:2-4)
- Joy is the happiness we experience when we walk in truth (1 Thess 3:9; 3 Jn 1:4)

According to the Bible joy is a feeling linked to our relationship with God. Joy is the peace and hope we experience receiving Christ's grace, the Father's love and the Holy Spirit's presence. Joy is not abstract but a real visceral sense of wonder and goodness.

Joy is a rare experience for people today. The obsession with consumerism disrupts the joy found in simple pleasures, because consumerism depends on dissatisfaction. With dissatisfaction we will keep buying. Gratitude helps us to embrace a simpler life. We begin to experience the joy of our salvation, and the joy of a new car, dress, phone or TV is no longer compelling. We embrace the value of the far more important elements of life—a love relationship with God, others and our beautiful world.

A branch in the field of psychology, called positive psychology, researched why some people thrived and were happy while others did not.¹ Why did

Singing has long been how I adore God. Like Eric Liddell, "I feel the pleasure of God." I decided to spend four days just picking up my guitar and singing whatever was in my heart. It was wonderful to return to this old habit that my new life as a senior pastor has lead me away from. I fell into the presence and pleasure of God immediately and found that one of my grateful places is no place at all but in an action—singing and playing the guitar.

—James Pagels

some individuals live satisfying and fulfilling lives despite their circumstances and others did not? The researchers found that wealth, education, beauty or fame did not equal happiness. One researcher, George Vaillant, completed a longitudinal study of Harvard graduates to discover which aspects contributed to successful living. The research results pointed to three things: physical health, close relationships and handling well difficult circumstances.²

Of particular interest are the latter two. Health is not guaranteed in this life, but relationships and how one handles troubles are personal choices. When Christ invites us into a personal relationship with him, we are filled with the Holy Spirit and we have the Holy Spirit's help. Jesus expected that believers would be in a rich community of love. These close relationships are a source of joy. Managing difficulties well is something Jesus modeled and Paul spoke about on several occasions.

I reflected on Galatians 5:22 in prayer and the word *joy* kept popping up in my mind. My life has been so busy, crazy and stressful lately, and people are noticing my discouragement and depression. I cannot force joy in my life, so I spent a great deal of time reflecting on all the things I should be joyful for, and things naturally came to mind. In the end I felt a desire to be more joyful in my life. I want people to see an outward expression of what is going on in my heart. I want people to see Christ in me as I go about my everyday ordinary tasks.

—David Huffman

REJOICE PRAYER

Joy is a positive emotion that comes from a place of strength and virtue. It is possible to be happy as a swindler, liar or gossip, but it is not possible to experience joy. Joy is a sacred emotion when the inner self is at peace with our Creator and at peace with our circumstances. Joy leads to optimism based on a relationship of trust in God's goodness. Joy may be expressed outwardly or carried within as a silent hope. What the secular world has discovered is that one of the ingredients for lasting change is joy; "joy is a more powerful motivator than fear."³

Fear, especially anxiety, is the most common emotion people experience when they are distressed. If there is a threat of any sort to one's value or safety, including the safety of belonging, the body reacts with anxiety. The anxiety urges the person to either run or hide or

find some sort of comfort. It's interesting that joy is associated with our relationship with Christ and not fear. Fear stifles hope. Worry keeps us up at night and makes us reactive during the day. Joy says my hope is not in my own strength, but in God's love and the Holy Spirit's power (Phil 1:18-19).

Rejoice prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving and gratitude. It lifts our eyes to the hills from where our strength comes. It reconnects us with God who delights in our

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praise. By praying with gratitude we are lifted in spirit and we are given a broader perspective. The Holy Spirit comforts us and reminds us of Jesus' love. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom to see beyond trials to the power of the cross to turn on the light in every place of darkness.

Even in the secular world people have found that thankfulness completely changes your perspective on your life. Those who are grateful are joyful. John Kralik's life was in shambles. His law firm was failing as well as his second marriage. He felt distant from his children. On a hike he felt inspired to write a simple thank you note, and then he decided to write one every day for 365 days. It unexpectedly and dramatically changed his life.⁴ As believers we have so many more reasons to be thankful.

The most basic response to God for all that God has done for us is gratitude. Paul writes, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving," (Col 4:2). Devote means to persist and hold fast. We watch and pray in an attitude of thanksgiving. There is nothing else we can offer back. God made us and loves us. Jesus saved us. The Holy Spirit partners with us. Gratitude as a response reminds us of the many gifts and graces we have received. It generates a thankful heart and openness to the Holy Spirit's movements in our lives and our days. The most basic response to life is an appreciation for its goodness. The most basic response to others is thankfulness for their place in our lives. The most basic response to God is gratefulness.

REJOICE PRAYER GUIDELINES

- Rejoice prayer is an affirmation of God's goodness and a response of gratitude for Christ's love and sacrifice (1 Thess 5:16-19).
- Rejoice prayer is not a naive dismissal of evil and injustice. It is a declaration of confidence in God.
- Rejoice prayer is not meant to cover up difficulties. All difficulties need prayer and reflection with the Holy Spirit. Talking with others and, when necessary,

All week I have been struggling with an interpersonal conflict that has been heating up between friends in our small group. I have felt like anything but rejoicing. This morning I put on my headphones and headed out to the local greenbelt. I feebly sang, but I couldn't muster much. At times I could feel my spirit lifting and a bit of joy coming in, but then the weight would return. The praise was a conscious effort and when I was not engaged in it, my mind soon returned to the darkness of the issue. Even so, after the time of rejoicing, I came away feeling strengthened and hungering for more.

—John Ray

getting help allow you to grow in faith and self-understanding. Rejoice prayer is an affirmation of faith not a bandage for denial.

- Rejoice prayer is an ongoing mindset rather than an occasional prayer.
- The psalms are examples of rejoicing while praying. The psalmist cries out his troubles, concerns or expectations and always concludes with gratitude to God.
- Rejoice prayer can be spontaneous such as when one holds a new baby, but it also is a conscious decision to be grateful.
- With practice we can become people of grace and gratitude. Rejoice prayer creates in us a more generous and loving nature.
- It invites us into the mystery and goodness of the present, to relinquish the past to God and to trust God for the future.
- Being ungrateful is a form of quenching the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is ever interceding on our behalf, and our joy and gratitude unleash power. Rejoice prayer replaces fear with hope.
- In whatever circumstance prayer of gratitude helps refocus us and strengthen us.

REJOICE PRAYER EXPERIENCE

Group Experience

- The experience will take ten to twenty minutes or more depending on how long you take for each section. If possible, begin with worship songs that focus on thanksgiving, gratitude and praise. If you don't have worship leaders, bring in some music to listen to that reminds you of God's goodness. You can sing or listen.
- A leader prepares the group by saying: "Rejoice prayers are short prayers of thanksgiving. Paul called us to rejoice always and to pray without ceasing. Jesus wanted his followers to have in them the same joy he has." Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-19.

We bought a second car for \$1,650. Lily picked it out. After two weeks she pulled into our driveway and all the radiator fluid poured out onto the ground. We towed it to a nearby garage. I prayed that it would not be serious, and I was surprised that I did not say one word about the car being her choice. As it turned out, it cost \$814 to replace a motor mount, get a new battery and a new radiator. I know what my usual reaction would be. I was shocked when I found myself thanking God that we had the money, that she broke down in front of our house instead of on the highway and that this happened now instead of in November when we'd drive to California. The Holy Spirit is working in me.

—Rick Adams

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- If you want, put a potted tree or branches in a pot and place it in the center of the group. You can also clear a wall to use. Pass out small pieces of paper or Post-It notes. Have everyone write down thanksgiving prayers and then place them on the tree or post them on a wall. (If writing and posting the prayers won't work, pray the thanksgiving prayers aloud.) While they are writing, you can have worship music in the background. Do the rejoice prayers in this suggested order:
 - *Prayers for God and the saints*: "Write down rejoice prayers for God and for people who have influenced your faith. Write as many as you want. Place them on the wall (or tree)."
 - Leader says: "Let's pray simple thanksgiving prayers for each thing you wrote down." "Lord, I rejoice in X. Thank you."
 - Allow enough time for everyone to pray several times.
 - *Prayers for difficult circumstances and trials*: "Write down difficult circumstances or trials in your personal life. Place them on the wall (or tree)."
 - Leader says: "We will pray prayers of rejoicing despite these circumstances. We trust the Spirit for deliverance." "Lord, I rejoice in you and trust you for X. Thank you."
 - If people are uncomfortable naming difficult circumstances in front of the group, have them write their prayers in silence.
 - *Prayers for family and friends*: "Write down the names of family and friends for whom you are grateful. Be specific as to why you are thanking God for them, such as "I thank Jesus for my friend who believes in me."
 - Leader says: "Let's pray simple thanksgiving prayers for each person you named." "Lord, thank you for X."
 - At the conclusion of the prayers, give people an opportunity to write a note of thanks to one of the people named.
- If desired, conclude with worship songs and a blessing.
- Debrief with the group. What was your experience like praying rejoice prayers? How did you experience God? What was hard about this type of praying? How can we maintain a spirit of gratitude?

Partner Experience

- With your partner, spend time giving specific thanks in each area: (1) God and the saints; (2) difficulties and trials; (3) family and friends; and (4) community, nation and world. The prayers are short prayers of gratitude. Allow enough time for reflection and verbal prayers in each area. This is not to pray for answers or guidance or intercession. The time is dedicated to solely giving thanks.

- Have a conversation with your partner about how the call to “rejoice always” might become a part of your daily life. Is there anyone for whom the Spirit is leading you to write a note of thanks or to call and thank?

Individual Experience

- For four days focus on different areas for rejoice prayer. Spend at least ten minutes actually giving thanks. Before you pray, make a list for each day below. Then name them aloud to God and give thanks as specifically as possible for each item on the list. If more come up while you're praying, give thanks for those too. If you want, sing songs of praise before and after the rejoice prayer time.
 - *Day One:* Give thanks for God and for people who have influenced you in your faith over the years.
 - *Day Two:* Give thanks for difficult circumstances. This will not be easy. Make a list of the primary circumstances, and then reflect on how you were shaped and how you grew in faith because of the situation. Then rejoice as authentically as you can. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in giving thanks.
 - *Day Three:* Give thanks for friends and family. Think about how these relationships have influenced you, how they have loved and cared for you.
 - *Day Four:* Give thanks for your neighborhood, community and government. Bless them. This is not the time to pray about all the things that are not going right, but for rejoicing always as God calls us to do.
- Journal about your experience. At the end of the rejoice prayer time, write a short email or letter or use social media to express thanks to someone from that time of thanksgiving.
- At the end of the week, reflect on how rejoice prayer is linked to praying without ceasing. How might you incorporate rejoicing into your daily life?

PRAYER JOURNEY

David Beck

I have served as the vice president for marketing at our company for fifteen years. It's a great company to work for. I believe in our products. I like the people I've been working with. They aren't all Christians, but they respect my faith and are good, hard-working people. A year ago I had to take a leave

of absence for six months because I had cancer. I needed surgery and follow-up chemotherapy. I wanted to work as much as possible, but my boss said they needed me to focus on my health. He said I would have a job with the company when I'm better.

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that six months wouldn't be enough, the company president called me and said they didn't want to lose marketing momentum. They gave my job to a peer. I understood, but I was angry. It seemed like I was being pushed aside. I had worked hard to create a marketing campaign that would run through the next several months. I even said I was willing to work part time to create the next phase. The president said no.

Not only did I lose my position, I learned from a colleague who came to visit that the new VP had completely changed my marketing strategy. I felt like I was being kicked while I was on the ground. I know that it wasn't about me, but I couldn't get over how I felt. I was worried about my attitude as the time for returning to work loomed closer.

I made an appointment to meet my pastor for coffee and told him I needed help. This was keeping me awake at night and I was having trouble liking these people. My pastor said, "David, go home and read Philippians 1:12-19. While Paul was in prison in Rome, he learned that in Philippi some were preaching Christ from goodwill and some for personal ambition. Now Philippi was Paul's baby. However, he came to the conclusion that he would rejoice and continue to rejoice. He

Leighton Ford

"In everything give thanks" reminds me of my longtime friend, John

would trust the Spirit for his deliverance. Go home and spend some time rejoicing and thanking God for what happened."

Giving thanks for losing my position seemed like crazy talk, but I decided to give it a try. The next morning after my wife left for work, I opened my Bible and read the passage several times. Then I said, "Well, Lord, here goes." I started rejoicing in the Lord. It was easy to be grateful to God. I was getting healthy and I experienced God's love and strength during my entire illness. Then I just started thanking God for the company, everyone in the company and finally I thanked God for the man who was in my position. I asked the Lord to bless all of them.

I didn't realize that I had been praying for over thirty minutes when my cell phone rang. Later in the day I noticed that something had changed in me. I felt more lighthearted and content. I felt love for the people at the company. I knew I could go back and be okay. It seemed like the Holy Spirit had lifted my eyes to the hills. In fact, I wondered what new thing the Lord was going to do in my life. I realized I was ready for a new challenge. Thank you, Lord, and thanks, pastor, for the help.

Wesley White. He was an evangelist with Billy Graham. I knew him first as

a classmate and fellow Canadian at Wheaton College. We prayed together almost daily, played hockey against local schools (he much better than me) and dreamed about our future in ministry. Most importantly, John introduced me (at a hockey game!) to a lovely farm girl from North Carolina who became my wife. For many years John itinerated on his own, preaching across North America and the United Kingdom in large and out of the way places, often with very little income. He led many to Christ, and earned two PhDs. Then about sixteen years ago on the very eve of a campaign, he had a major stroke and, as he says, was "suddenly silenced."

Although his mind was alert, his writing skillful, his attitude positive, speech was limited. When I occasionally called he would laugh, say "Yes, yes." That was all, except he would end every talk with four words as clear as a bell: "Jesus Christ is Lord!" This summer Jeanie and I went to visit him and his wife in Toronto. She was recovering from an illness and they were in two small rooms in a nursing facility. Several family members were

present. As we got ready to leave I said, "John, I have always been moved that somehow, in spite of that stroke, you can always say, 'Jesus Christ is Lord.'"

At that he sat up straight and in staccato phrases—almost robotically—said, "In-ev-ry-thing-give-thanks-for-this-is-the-will-of-God-in-Christ-con-cerning-you." Then his eyes moving across the circle, he said, "Betty—Linda—Kathleen—Jeanie—Leighton—and me." How he had to discipline himself to be able to say those words of Paul! What practice over and over it must have taken!

Since our visit his lovely Irish lass, Kathleen, has gone to heaven. I am sure, for all the loss, John Wesley White is still saying those words to himself and others. I remember him as an eloquent and unusual preacher, one suddenly silenced. But no sermon he preached could have been better than those words he spoke to us that hot summer day in that tiny room in Toronto. John, I am seeking to remember in everything give thanks, and I give thanks for you!
Your friend of the years,
Leighton

FURTHER READING

- Page, Josephine. *Thank You Prayer*. New York: Scholastic, 2005. (This is a wonderful children's prayer book.)
- Stoddard, Sandol. *Prayers, Praises, and Thanksgivings*. New York: Dial, 1992. (This is a prayer book for older children.)
- Whyte, Daniella. *365 Days of Thanking God: Cultivating a Heart of Everyday Thanks*. Dallas: Torch Legacy, 2010.

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