



## BIBLE STUDY

# REJOICE

The cloud of witnesses surrounding us can teach us much about what it means to bring your best self to the life you've been given. This Bible study will invite us into the dynamic web of life anchored by “renew, respond, and rejoice.” This is vocation in the richest sense of that term—who are you and how are you called to service in a world full of surprises? There is so much to do. How do we stay spiritually healthy in the face of overwhelming need?

by Catherine Malotky  
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## *Rejoice in the Lord*

### Key verse

Philippians 4:4

*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again,  
I will say, Rejoice.”*

### Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW, the red book)* or *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW, the green book)*
- Three candles

### Beginning

#### Reflection

1. Take a moment to quiet yourself. Light a candle or close your eyes. Be still and ask yourself, “What thoughts are weighing on my mind? What responsibilities are pressing for my attention? What feelings threaten to erode my sense of well-being?” If it helps, jot down some thoughts in your journal.

### READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4 ALOUD.

2. Notice what comes up in your thoughts and feelings. Does this feel like a command to you? Does it feel like it could rise naturally from your current circumstances, or would you have to work at it? Note your thoughts in your journal.

### READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.

3. Take another moment to turn inward and be with the peace of God which passes all understanding. Does that change how you feel inside?

### Set the stage

We live in a context where our lives are rarely free from complexity, struggle, and demands. You may have grown up hearing and thinking that “daily taking up our cross” was not only a faithful response but also an unavoidable one. You probably knew someone whose

motto is “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” It may even be yours. Those feeling the challenge of life might even say, “Life is tough. Get used to it.”

The Apostle Paul knew that many (most?) people complain about the difficulty of being faithful. They might have reminded him that renewal is hard work and responding takes concerted effort. They might even have said: “And now you tell us that we’re supposed to rejoice in all this effort? Isn’t that asking a bit too much? Paul surely heard their complaint, just as Moses heard the complaints of the people of Israel in the wilderness. But Paul heard also where they placed their emphasis. They felt they could not rejoice in all this hard work and effort. So Paul repeated his words to them: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” I have not asked you to rejoice in your efforts, or in the challenges of life. But rather, I tell you to rejoice in the Lord—in the one who is with you in all of this effort and amidst all of the challenges.

In this session, we will explore the cycle of faith between renew, respond, and rejoice.

Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I rejoice when things are complicated or unresolved?
- What feelings inspire rejoicing? Might there be some additional feelings to associate with rejoicing?
- How does rejoicing spring out of responding and lead again to renewal?

## Learning from the saints

### *Miriam’s witness*

#### **READ EXODUS 15:20 AND NUMBERS 26:59.**

4. Who is Miriam?
5. Why did Miriam rejoice? Read Exodus 14:19–31.

6. On the one hand we can understand Miriam’s rejoicing, but there is definitely another side to the story. The people have escaped slavery in Egypt, but they now face life in an unknown wilderness. What are they up against? Read Exodus 12:37–39; 15:22–25; and 16:1–3.

In Exodus 15:21, notice that Miriam’s song is directed to the Lord (in a manner that recalls the words of Paul). Perhaps she was rejoicing because their lives had been spared. But things were still dire. Perhaps Miriam was not rejoicing in her/their circumstances, but rejoiced because she was grounded in the faith that God would see them through whatever was to come.

This is rejoicing as an expression of faith. Faith declares, “I will look first for what God has done for me” and not merely to what God has *not* done. Faith does not choose to withhold thanks until all current needs have been met. Miriam did not choose to say: “When everything gets back to normal, to the way I want it to be, *then* I will rejoice.” Instead, in front of the whole people of Israel (a people in need of her example), she declared “Now is the time for rejoicing. Now is the time to thank the Lord. Now is the time to live with hope,” even though an unknown wilderness lay before them. (See “Choosing Joy,” p. 12.)

7. Given the people’s sense of vulnerability, their grumbling (see Exodus 14:11–12), and fickle thankfulness, it seems that Miriam’s dancing was out of step with the prevailing attitude of her people. How do you think she was able to rejoice so unashamedly? What do you think her rejoicing did for the women who danced with her? What do you think her rejoicing did for Miriam’s ability to endure the struggles still in front of her (and her people)?

### *The witness of a paralyzed man’s friends*

#### **READ MARK 2:1–12.**

8. Give your imagination time to really think about the sights and sounds at the beginning of this story. What do you see and hear?

9. Whose faith does Jesus commend? (See Mark 2:5.)
10. Jesus forgives the paralyzed man's sins, and, in response to the scribes' complaints, Jesus also cured him of his paralysis. These are both very good things, for which everyone could rejoice. What did the paralyzed man learn about his friends' commitment to him?

What makes the actions of the paralyzed man's friends an act of rejoicing? Think of rejoicing as whatever response your heart/spirit wishes to make when it feels generous and contented.

**Generosity** stems from the belief that there is always enough and more to go around. An example of this is the attitude Jesus dared to feed 5,000 people with a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread (Matthew 14:13–21).

**Contentment** stems from the belief that "I have enough and do not really need anything more." An example is when Jesus resists the devil's temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' behavior demonstrates that he trusts that God knows what he needs and will help him satisfy these needs in a healthy manner. Therefore, Jesus' responses to the devil seem to be saying: "I do not, however, trust that what you are offering to me is what I truly need or need at this moment" (Matthew 4:1–11).

The paralyzed man's friends could have been like so many who offer pity while secretly feeling fortunate that they weren't in the same boat. What caught Jesus attention, however, was their faith, the opposite of pity. It was a faith that trusted that if Jesus had healed others then why not this friend? Their faith said not only "What have we got to lose?" but more so, "What a wonderful thing this would be to do together."

11. What do you think enabled the paralyzed man's friends to reject scarcity and embrace generosity and contentment?

## Trying it out

### Self-talk

Recall a time when you were able to embrace generosity and contentment. What enabled you to be generous and contented given that our culture so depends on us believing that we don't/can't have enough (scarcity)?

It is an odd thing. We often think that our deepest desires are to get what we want. Yet, our greatest joy is often not experienced when good things happen to us, but rather when we are a part of good things that happen for people we care about and love. We could simply chalk this up to our learned modesty—the kind that feels embarrassed by too much attention and worries about being conceited. So it might be hard to be joyful about our own blessings. Yet, issues of modesty aside, rarely does personal good fortune or even a great achievement inspire lasting rejoicing.

12. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?

### Self-care

13. How might you cultivate and practice generosity and contentment—a life of rejoicing?

Our deepest and most enduring rejoicing seems to manifest when we use our gifts on behalf of others. When we experience ourselves as generous, compassionate, creative and courageous for the sake of others, it can be renewing. When we give, we experience in that same moment that *a new and right spirit* has been created within us. This is the cycle of faith. When our rejoicing seems diminished or faint, as it surely will become in time, then we are led to seek the renewal that begins the cycle again. (See "We Can Do More," p. 18.)

And what's not to celebrate in this?

When we seek *renewal*, we present ourselves to the God who breathes freshness and inspires goodness and nurtures our gifts within us.

When we *respond* we dare to be the creative, courageous and caring people God has shown us we are.

And when we *rejoice*, we experience joy in the way God blesses us and others with and through an attitude of generosity and contentment.

Because God knows we need to renew, respond and rejoice, God invites us also to believe that each stop along this cycle reflects an aspect of God's love and desire for us.

In the Eucharist, we see this cycle expressed in worship. God offers a meal to us, knowing that we are hungry to be with God, to have God incarnate and close. In passing the peace, God offers the gift of reconciliation and we clear the air between us, creating the possibility of renewal together as a community of faith. God's response is the meal itself, God giving God's self to all who receive it. God, as host, rejoices that we come to the table set for us, for it is God's desire that we know the love and peace of Christ, and that we take it into ourselves and are renewed. We respond by eat-

ing and drinking, and we rejoice after with prayers of thanksgiving. (See "A Joyful Exchange," p. 26.)

### Closing

Light three candles, one for renew, one for respond, and one for rejoice. Arrange them in a triangle and remember that they are the anchor points for our life of faith. Remember the cycle of faith, and the movement between these points.

**READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7 ALOUD**, slowly and meaningfully. Give yourself a few moments to let it sink in, and then close with this prayer:

*Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 117) 🌸*

*"...Where two or three are gathered in my name,  
I am there among them."*

MATTHEW 18:20

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# REJOICE

## *Rejoice in the Lord*

### Overview of session concepts

Often we think of rejoicing as something that happens spontaneously. For example, when you hear that you have been chosen for a job you were seeking, or when you learn that a tumor recently discovered in your body is not malignant, you are likely to rejoice. In these moments, no one has to tell you: “Rejoice!” Rather, your rejoicing seems to well up inside of you, and you can’t help but want to share your good news with others.

But, in Philippians, the Apostle Paul says: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.” It’s a command, not a statement of what’s true. Why does Paul think we might forget to rejoice unless we are instructed to do it? In Philippians 4:2, Paul’s letter reveals that there is a conflict or competition of some sort between Euodia and Syntyche, both of whom have ministered alongside Paul in the past, but are now not “of the same mind.” There are plenty of complications in life that can distract us from the work that God is doing. Life is never complete or resolved once and for all. Even death can leave questions and unresolved issues for survivors.

### Beginning

#### *Reflection*

Ask the group to take a moment to quiet themselves. Light a candle. Be still and ask them to reflect on: “What thoughts are weighing on my mind? What responsibilities are pressing for my attention? What feelings threaten to erode my sense of well-being?” Ask them to jot down some thoughts in their journals.

**READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4 ALOUD.**

**READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.**

### *Set the stage*

Here is one way to see what Paul is trying to say. We all know that when a loved one dies, it initially may require great effort to engage in conversations with family or to attend a grief support group. Rejoicing of any kind may not seem appropriate. Yet, what if you rejoiced in the people and the resources that offer you support in the midst of your grief? In this case, rejoicing is not about feeling happy, but rather about feeling grateful. And realizing your thankfulness for support might also encourage you to trust that healing is possible and healing is happening.

In this session, we will explore the cycle of faith between renew, respond, and rejoice.

### Learning from the saints

#### *Miriam’s witness*

1. A prophetess and sister to Aaron and Moses.
2. The army of Pharaoh—which was seeking to annihilate the people of Israel—had lost all its soldiers; all drowned in the Red Sea. The lives of people of Israel were spared (“saved” Exodus 14:30); and they were finally free of their slavery in Egypt.
3. The people of Israel fled from Egypt with virtually none of their possessions. Water was scarce. They had little food. They were in an unfamiliar land and would have to employ all of their resourcefulness simply to survive.

4. Maybe Miriam's faith was so sure that she was able to turn to God in thanks without being concerned about the reaction she'd get from those around her. Her rejoicing could have been inspiring to others. Keeping God's faithfulness in mind would help her face the unknown before her people. Trust is a powerful motivator and consoler.

### *The witness of a paralyzed man's friends*

#### **READ MARK 2:1–12.**

5. You would see lots of people crowded together. The text is not clear whether they were listening to Jesus talk (it would have been relatively quiet) or if he was making his way from small group to small group (like a party, it would have been noisy). At some point all attention must have been diverted to the ceiling. Then, everyone would have seen the paralyzed man slowly being lowered into the house.
6. The people/friends who brought the paralyzed man.
7. Yet even without this "happy ending," we can see that the paralyzed man's friends have already achieved their goal: to demonstrate the lengths they will go to for the sake of their paralyzed friend. Just getting their friend out of his house and onto the roof of the house was already a victory. And having accomplished that, there was no way the paralyzed man would have returned home—healed or not—without feeling the commitment and support of his friends.
8. Their joy (or rejoicing) in this friendship and the hope that sprang from it is central to their scheme, and it clearly won the day with Jesus.

### **Trying it out**

A point that doesn't need much introduction is that our own society's economic message is that none of us ever have enough. Thus we are encouraged to make consumption our habit and to set our goal as the satisfaction of our needs and wants. This message, of course, is based on the notion of scarcity—a belief that we do not have what we need and a fear that there is not enough to go around.

### **Closing**

Light three candles, one for renew, one for respond, and one for rejoice. Arrange them in a triangle and remember that they are the anchors points for our life of faith. Remember the cycle of faith, and the movement between these points.

Read Philippians 4:4–7 aloud, slowly and meaningfully. Give the group a few moments to let it sink in, and then close with this prayer:

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