

REJOICE

STUDY #1

LONG READING: EXODUS 1:1- 2:10

SHORTER READING: EXODUS 1:15- 2:10

THINK ABOUT IT

We don't often think about rejoicing when we read this story. Instead, our emotions are drawn to the intense suffering that the people of Israel were experiencing. Pharaoh demanded the death of all male children. Despite the midwives resisting this evil, lives were still being taken. This is what prompted a mother to take drastic action, setting Moses adrift in a basket. Imagine what she must have felt as she laid him inside, walked to the water's edge, and pushed that basket away. Consider what she might have been thinking as she walked home, leaving her boy behind? Would she see him again or did she expect him to die? Imagine her overwhelming relief when her daughter returned and told her that not only was her son safe, but that she could have contact with him under the protection of Pharaoh's daughter. She would hold her baby again! Now consider Pharaoh's daughter. Did she rejoice upon finding the baby? Scripture says that she felt sorry for him. Pity may have caused her to extend protection, yet she brought him into her house. Moses became her own son.

This story is filled with suffering and sorrow—and yet there is rejoicing. God intercedes in this story through the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. God intercedes through Jochebed, Moses's mother. God intercedes through the unexpected daughter of Pharaoh. God intercedes and adds a note of rejoicing among the symphony of anguish. A small note at first, but one that grows into a melody that overwhelmingly sweeps Israel out of captivity. Oh yes! This among the sorrow of this story, there is indeed rejoicing as God intercedes.

DISCUSS

- 1- Reflect on the dynamics of the story. How does it make you feel?
- 2- Rejoicing can look different and come upon us in different ways. Do you have some unusual experiences of rejoicing? Have you ever experienced rejoicing during moments of sorrow or stress?
- 3- Talk about the action of each of the different women in this story. How might they inspire us to resist the evil we encounter?

PRAY

TRY THIS: Take some time to journal about the sorrows you experience or you see the world experiencing around you. Then consider where resistance can lead to rejoicing. Pray for the people who resist. Pray for your own strength to resist evil and open your heart to where God might lead you to resist next.

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STUDY #2

LONG READING: 1 SAMUEL 1- 2:11

SHORTENED READING 1:3-2:2

THINK ABOUT IT

Here is another example of a mother giving her child up to God in faith. Just as Jochebed trusted in God's providence as she placed him in the Nile, Hannah trusted God in prayer and promise. Imagine desperately wanting something but being unable to do anything about it. Add to that pain, someone else tormented you about your heart's unfulfilled desire to the point of despair and depression. Hannah cried out and God answers with a "yes!" But she knows that the child is a gift from God and chooses to give the gift back. Dedicating Samuel to God. It must have been incredibly difficult for Hannah, to leave her child behind, her only child behind. And yet she trusts in God's answer and rejoices. She sings "my heart exults in the Lord" as her action reflects trust in God who answers our prayer.

We don't necessarily receive answers like Hannah did, but as Psalm 66 tells us, God listens to our prayers. Have you experienced God listening lately? Are there some answered prayers worth rejoicing—even if the answer was not what you were hoping? Hannah's story is unexpected, as she returns her answered prayer back to God, and even then she rejoices. Consider, however, that rejoicing often follows a request. Rejoicing begins with *asking*. Rejoicing occurs in *watching*. Rejoicing wells up in *anticipating*. Rejoicing is not tied to the answer, but found in the conversation and connection we have with God.

DISCUSS

- 1- What do you think it was like for Hannah to be with child, knowing that she would give up her son to be raised by the priest?
- 2- How do you think her experience compared with Moses' mother giving him up to the Nile, or Mary's experience, giving up Jesus to the cross? How did God's faithfulness play a part in all three of those stories?
- 3- How have you had a rejoicing experience in answered prayer?

PRAY

TRY THIS: Try starting a prayer journal that includes both measurable and general requests. Commit to a length of time to keep journaling and allow it to train your heart to ask, watch, and receive. Try color coding the words or adding images. Look for ways to rejoice in the process as well as the answers.

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STUDY#3

READ: LUKE 2:21-40

THINK ABOUT IT

God LOVES to give us opportunities for rejoicing! Simeon waited and waited and waited on the Lord. He listened to the Holy Spirit, he took joy in the promises that God gave him, and he OBEYED when the Holy Spirit told him to go to the temple that day. What an exciting moment for Simeon when he realized that the Lord was in his presence in a tangible way! He could hold him and even hug him. Imagine holding Jesus in your arms, the weight of the infant in the crook of your elbow. Simeon's life-long prayer was answered in his old age, blessing him with the opportunity to rejoice, and rejoice greatly!

But what if Simeon hadn't listened to the Holy Spirit that day? What if he had been "too busy" at work, or watching TV, or shopping, or skimming social media for updates? We live in a FOMO culture—we struggle with the *fear of missing out*. As a result, we fill our lives with as much as we can, and as a result we live with the noise that comes with consuming life to the fullest, with chasing every corner of experience.

Consider: How does the Holy Spirit leading fit in to that mix?

This is a different type of missing out. If Simeon had not followed the Spirit leading, he would have missed the opportunity to lift up the salvation of the world in his arms. When we follow the Spirit, we are given chances we would never find on our own to rejoice. In making room for God, we make room for celebration we would never find on our own.

DISCUSS:

1- Do you think meeting Jesus was the type of experience Simeon expected? What emotions do you think Simeon felt before, during, and after?

2- Do you struggle with a fear of missing out? How do you deal with that fear?

3- How do you feel Holy Spirit movement in your life?

PRAY

TRY THIS: Create a new opening screen for your devices: computer, phone, tablet. Something that reminds you: each time you pick up your device to pause for a set time (5, 10, 30 seconds) and pray. It could be a prayer for something specific, it could be a centering phrase like "Move in me Holy Spirit," or it could even be silence. Try opening up spaces for Holy Spirit movement, even small ones, throughout your day.

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STUDY #4

READING: LUKE 2: 1-20

THINK ABOUT IT

We finish our devotions together with the Christmas story as it is usually read. Think about the rejoicing that comes with this amazing story. Think of Mary who “treasured up all these things” (vs.19). Think about the angels who rejoiced, singing praises to God above. Think about the great rejoicing in heaven that night, to the point where it seemed to spill out onto the earth! Think of the shepherds, the ones receiving this news in a spectacular way, being led to a manger to meet God here on earth! Think about the manger—dirty and smelly and noisy and beautiful and unexpected and extraordinary. The mighty One, the powerful God, the creator of the universe lying there. REJOICE!!

We hear this story over and over again. Does this story still excite you? Does it fill you with the type of rejoicing you are reading about? Or has it dulled in repetition? That scene can feel so distant, across time and space. It appears over and over again. It becomes trapped in our nativity figurines and “holiday cheer.”

We end on this story with the challenge to join the shepherds at the manger side, to be caught up in the awesome wonder of this scene again. Not simply to find that warm, joyful feeling, but to be so moved that we can't help but go out and tell people what we have seen and what we have heard!

Christ has COME— Christ will COME AGAIN

REJOICE!

DISCUSS

- 1- What part of this story resonated with you this time you've read it? Why? Or did nothing particularly stand out to you? Reflect.
- 2- Do you feel like *rejoicing* this year? How might rejoicing look differently around the manger for each character present?
- 3- Have you ever experienced a time you were so joyful in God that you couldn't help but tell someone about it right away?

PRAY

TRY THIS: Look at a nativity scene you may have in your house--or draw/color a scene from this passage. Use it as a starting point but then try to imagine the world beyond it. Listen to a song that brings this scene to life for you. Meditate on the story, let it become new to you again. Take some time to pray that the depth of meaning of GOD coming to dwell with us and let it inspire rejoicing.