



Part II—Finding Our Joy

LESSON SIX

Finding Our Joy in Christ: “I Will Gay It Again, Rejoice”



SCRIPTURE

Philippians 4:1–23

MAIN IDEA

Christian joy emerges from a deep belief that God is good, and God reigns forever.

Opening Prayer

O God, as we immerse ourselves in your word today, lead us in your way, that we may serve you faithfully. Guide us as we celebrate our love for you, for you are the source of our joy. Amen.

SUMMARY

How do we find joy in a chaotic world? So many things make us anxious and keep us from experiencing calm and peace. We think we should be better able to tap into inner joy, but we are not. Christian joy, though, is more than feeling happy. It emerges from a deep belief that God is good, and God reigns forever. The word

“rejoice” is used again and again in this small letter to the Philippians. Paul is in prison but rejoices for he can do all things through the One who strengthens him (4:13).

Women—specifically Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche—helped to start the Philippian church and were co-workers with Paul. The church was being led and attended to, even though Paul was in prison. Those in the Philippian church knew what it was like to suffer for the gospel. They lived in a climate of intolerance toward unapproved religions. Yet, this letter from Paul encouraged them to rejoice, even in the midst of dire circumstances. They knew that though they experienced hardship, distress, and persecution, they were promised life eternal, and they rejoiced. Today, we have the same promise and can experience the same joy.

LESSON

I have always been encouraged by those who seem to have joyful souls. They go out of their way to share their joy and put something good into the world. Some people seem to be naturally joyful, some have to be reminded to be joyful, and sometimes it seems that some have lost their joy.

Some of us tend to be joyful at sporting events or concerts. Some have hobbies that we love, like quilting, painting, playing golf, rebuilding cars, or cooking. Doing these things—and sometimes just being in the environment where these things are done, like in a church community room, a makeshift art studio, a garage, a chef’s kitchen, or on the golf course—gives us joy.

Reclaiming Joy

I have not heard many sermons on Christian joy, and I am not sure why that is. Is it not in

our tradition to talk about expressing our joy? Do our concerns and anxiety keep us from experiencing joy? Do we think of joy as being secular and not sacred? Do we feel embarrassed to express joy when so many others are suffering?

In some traditions, certain activities that exude joy are banned, like dancing, for example. This has even included liturgical dance in worship settings. Music, which also gives us such joy, has also been censored, as certain music and musical instruments were not considered appropriate in worship. Curiously, as time passes, the same music or instruments, which at one time were deemed inappropriate, become prevalent and even normative in churches.

For years, children’s joyful voices in church sanctuaries were not allowed. Motherhood, how and when it is appropriate to care for children, sexuality, and nontraditional family structures have been the source of official or unofficial policies. Women’s bodies have been regulated, for example how a woman dresses, and even how women pastors dress.

To add to this, some cultures have been over-controlled, and their traditions and cultural activities prohibited. Professor of history at Rutgers University, Dr. Leslie Alexander says, “One of the laws that has struck and haunted me since the time I encountered it is a law that was passed in Charleston essentially saying that enslaved and free Black people are not allowed to participate in any kind of expression of joy. So every imaginable aspect of enslaved people’s lives is being surveilled, policed and controlled.”²³

If African Americans in South Carolina, New York, Virginia, and other cities assembled for worship, were caught singing or dancing, played

23 *The 1619 Project*, season 1, episode 5, “Fear,” featuring Nikole Hannah-Jones, February 9, 2023, Hulu, video, [hulu.com/watch/bc4babb3-59ae-4adf-9c64-383c938e74e4?play=false&utm_source=shared_link](https://www.hulu.com/watch/bc4babb3-59ae-4adf-9c64-383c938e74e4?play=false&utm_source=shared_link). Must have a Hulu subscription to access this video.

musical instruments, gathered on Sunday mornings or held funerals at night, they could be violently punished, arrested or killed.²⁴

But people will find a way to live out their faith and share their joy. Theologian Daniel Migliore suggests, "Paul cannot help but rejoice, and he urges his fellow Christians to join him in rejoicing, just as Mary sang at the annunciation of the coming birth of Christ, 'My spirit rejoices in God my Savior' (Luke 1:47) and just as Jesus counseled his disciples, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (John 16:33 RSV)."²⁵

Like Paul, our joy is found in Christ Jesus. When we spend time in Christ's presence in prayer, we find joy. When our mourning is turned into dancing, we rejoice. The knowledge that we will receive the gift of life eternal fills us with gratitude and joy.

Activity

Make "Joy Jars" by distributing strips of paper to your group that read "I rejoice for _____." Ask each person to write what they are joyful for. Collect the notes in a jar before your prayer time. Conclude your prayer and devotion time by reading Philippians 4:4-7 and sing a hymn of joy and praise.

More Than a Feeling

Christian joy is more than just an emotion. It is a way of responding to and living one's life. Joy is the second fruit of the spirit, preceded by love and followed by peace (Gal 5:22-23). The Holy Spirit provides us with the opportunity to

experience Christ's joy. The concept of joy is found in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. In the entry on "joy" in the *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Jouette Bassler suggests, "Because the early Christians believed that the advent of Jesus marked the inbreaking of God's final redemptive act, all the eschatological joy that Israel had anticipated was now associated with Jesus."²⁶

Persons who are among the most oppressed in the world, who certainly experience pain, anguish, anxiety, and despair, also exhibit such joy in Christ. Colleagues and friends I have visited around the world, who often live in difficult conditions, have opened up their homes and shared their food, their hospitality and their joy with me. I have always been amazed at how these friends express Christian joy, even in the midst of such hardship.

In contrast, some who are very wealthy and privileged are sometimes very troubled. Of course, this is not everyone's experience, but contrary to popular belief, wealth and privilege are not reliable paths to joy.

Paul and His Friends

Paul is joyful in his letter to the Philippians, even though he was in prison when he wrote it! In Philippians 4:1-23, Paul offers encouragement to his friends. A funny thing about Paul is that he evangelized his Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-34). And, at the end of the letter, Paul writes, "All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household" (4:22). Paul sent greetings to the Philippian church on behalf of the new Christians in Emperor Nero's charge!

24 Leslie Alexander and Michelle Alexander in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, Nikole-Hannah Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, Jake Silverstein, eds. (New York: One World, 2021), 105-106, 109.

25 Daniel L. Migliore, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Philippians and Philemon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 160.

26 Jouette M. Bassler in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, general ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 511.

Paul had a young church that depended on him to lead and guide them, and he had other churches, as well. He was imprisoned, yet thankfully, he had people who traveled with him. Timothy, who was like a son to him, and Epaphroditus, who brought Paul gifts from Philippi and became sick and almost died, frequently traveled with Paul. Paul was grateful for these friends.

Women like Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche were co-workers with Paul and helped him to start the Philippian church. Lydia was Paul's first convert in Philippi in Macedonia. She and her household were baptized by Paul, and she provided hospitality to him in her home. She was a businesswoman of means, who sold luxurious purple cloth (Acts 16:11–15, 40).

In Philippians 4:3, Paul encourages the church to cooperate with Euodia and Syntyche. He writes, "Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel." Theologian Elsa Tamez suggests that Euodia and Syntyche "were certainly influential women, perhaps in charge of ministries such as administration, finance, hospitality, pastoral care, and teaching."²⁷

In Philippians 4:2, Paul writes, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Some biblical commentators have speculated that these women had a disagreement and were fighting, and that Paul calls on a "loyal companion" to mediate the dispute.

Some others suppose that Paul was simply reminding Euodia and Syntyche to spread unity in the church and for loyal church persons of faith to support these women leaders. After all, this was not the first time Paul urged those in

Philippi to be of the same mind (see 2:2 and 2:5). Paul encouraged the church to have Christlike qualities and to have the mind of Christ. Regardless of the circumstances, these women were significant leaders in the church.

Self-proclaimed preachers who were preaching out of their own self-interest were around Paul. He wondered if these folks intended to increase his suffering while he was imprisoned (1:17). He had the weight of the world on his shoulders. He had every reason to despair, but he was still hopeful. He was suffering, and yet he was thankful.

Paul uses the word *rejoice* nine times in this small, four-chapter letter.

- He writes of those self-proclaiming Christians, "What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I **rejoice**. Yes, and I will continue to **rejoice**" (Phil. 1:18).
- "I am glad and **rejoice** with all of you—and in the same way you also must be glad and **rejoice** with me" (2:17–18).
- "I am the more eager to send [Epaphroditus], therefore, in order that you may **rejoice** at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious" (2:28).
- "Finally, my brothers and sisters, **rejoice** in the Lord" (3:1).
- "**Rejoice** in the Lord always; again I will say, **Rejoice**. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:4–7).

27 Elsa Tamez, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Claire Miller Colombo and Alicia J. Batten, *Wisdom Commentary, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 51 (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical Press, 2017), 103.

- "I **rejoice** in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me" (4:10).

Paul's Joy Through Suffering

In *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, Jouette Bassler and Mark Allan Powell suggest that Paul stresses the paradox that "joy can be experienced in the midst of temporal afflictions (Rom. 5:3). Paul further suggests that affliction . . . could be viewed as a reflection of Jesus' suffering, and thus it becomes a sign of the true disciple or apostle and a further basis for rejoicing (2 Cor. 11:23–12:10). Thus, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, written under circumstances of severe apostolic suffering, is also the most joyous of all his letters."²⁸

Amid his personal trials, and even though he is far away from Macedonia, far from Philippi, Paul is joyful, for "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (4:13). Michael Bird and Nijay Gupta in their commentary on Philippians write, "In no other Pauline letter, nor in any other New Testament book or text, do we find such a pervasive infusion of celebration, joy, and hope in the issuing of commands and exhortations."²⁹

Activity

Consider a life filled with rejoicing and how that might look. Write out a list of essential elements that you would need to find your joy rooted in Christ.

Finding Our Joy

Many years ago, when I was associate pastor for worship, music, and the arts at Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, I led a Bible study at the Center for Whole Life at Cabrini

Green, which was a housing project in Chicago. The church rented an apartment there, and it was a drop-in center for parents and children to develop and nurture their gifts and find encouragement.

The Bible study I led included about five women who met each week. When we first began, the women were quiet and did not have much to say. A month later, individuals began to lead the group in prayer and in studying scripture.

One day, we ended with a prayer that the women led. I will never forget being so humbled when one woman offered her petition to God. She said, "Thank you, God, for the abundance you have given us." I was floored. Abundance. She lived in one of the worst housing projects in Chicago—in Cabrini Green. Abundance and Cabrini Green do not go together. These women lived with steel fences around their project and metal detectors as you walked into their building.

They would not let their children play on the playground equipment, because someone had been shot by a stray bullet there once. They had so little, especially compared to the extravagances of Michigan Avenue and the magnificent mile, which was just a few blocks away.

The environment of the housing project was oppressive, and the residents constantly received negative messages about themselves. Drug lords ruled their lives. There was only one way in and out of the building and drug dealers stood at that entrance and ran the elevators. Often only one elevator was working, so it was stressful just to leave or enter the building.

Even though their existence was meager, the women in the Bible study were joyful and

28 Jouette M. Bassler and Mark Allan Powell in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, Revised and Updated*, Mark Allan Powell, general ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 497.

29 Michael F. Bird, Gupta, Nijay K, *Philippians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 170.

thankful for God's blessings. Christian joy is more than feeling happy. It emerges from a deep belief that God is love, and God's love, grace, and care for us is never-ending. These women knew what the apostle Paul knew, that the more we experience the abundant grace of God, the more our joy and thankfulness to God increases. Our Christian experience is filled with contradictions that do not always make sense. When we see our blessings before us, even though it is hard for others to see, we give thanks to God in everything and even rejoice, though it seems counterintuitive. For some reason, hardship does not always kill hope and joy. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. Let's reclaim joy as part of our Presbyterian tradition.

Closing Prayer

O God, we often complain about our life experiences, when there are others who have fewer resources and opportunities to live healthy and happy lives. We count our multiple resources, when there are those who do not have any. Forgive us for not recognizing the pain and angst in the world. Lead us to participate in your reign, providing opportunities and solutions that change the world. Amen.

Reflection Questions

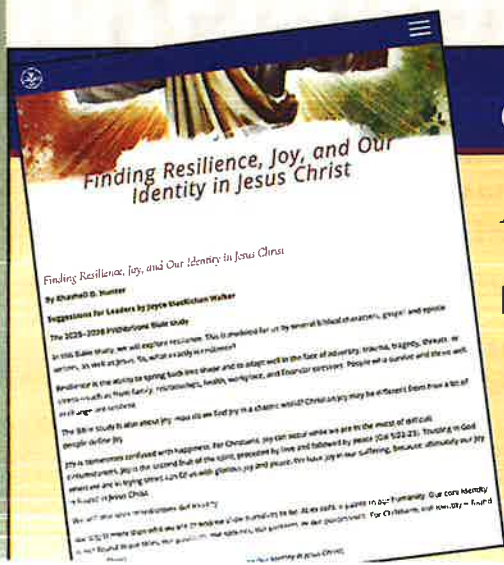
1. What lessons can we learn from those in the Philippian church?
2. What can we learn from the women in the Bible study group at Cabrini Green?
3. When we are frustrated and even outraged at injustice, how is it possible to rejoice?
4. How do we find joy, even in the midst of suffering?
5. What would it look like to be given permission, and even encouragement, to be joyful "always"?
6. Paul writes, "Do not worry" (Phil. 4:6). Could it be that a definition of joy is the absence of worry?
7. What steps shall we take for joyous service in the world, as we work with others to share the joy and faith of Christ?

ON THE WEB...

Finding Resilience, Joy, and Our Identity in Jesus Christ

Bible study materials, including a poster, bulletin cover, and the Workshop for Leaders, are available on PW's web pages to download for free. Check for the author's blog beginning August 2025.

Visit presbyterianwomen.org/bible-study/resilience.



This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Suggestions for Leaders

LESSON SIX: Finding Our Joy in Christ: "I Will Say It Again, Rejoice"

Central Concept

Christian joy emerges from a deep trust that God is good, and God reigns forever. Therefore, we acknowledge the tragedies, losses, and challenges that occur in life, in community, and in the world. At the same time, we trust God is sovereign over the universe; is actively involved in and revealing Godself to the world through the work of the Holy Spirit; and through Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, is gathering and guiding its worship and work. Throughout, we strive to reflect and to create the kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven," through a life of worship, community, and service to others.

Connect

(15-20 minutes) Open with the lesson's Opening Prayer.

Tell participants that as Christians we affirm God is a triune God—God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit.

Make three signs with "God is . . ." on the top of one, "Jesus is . . ." on the second, and "The Holy Spirit is . . ." on the third. Tell participants to move among the pages and write endings for each, expressing affirmations the church makes and affirmations that are true for them. These can be titles, descriptive adjectives, actions, claims of faith. Encourage everyone to write as many as they can think of, to add additional ideas to the ones already there, and to attempt to fill the pages! Assure the group they are not bound by traditional words but are welcome to offer their own ideas and imaginative wonderings.

After five minutes, ask everyone to choose and write down one ending from each list that is meaningful to them personally.

Ask the participants to form small groups and take turns naming one descriptor at a time, briefly saying why it is meaningful, with no comments offered in response. Instruct everyone to be listening for the picture of the triune God that is emerging in their groups from the selected words.

When it looks like most groups have finished, ask them to do two things.

1. Think about and describe the picture of the triune God their group has formed.
2. Identify what in the picture is a cause for joy/rejoicing in who God is for humanity.

Invite and record on a new sign only the things about the triune God that are cause for joy/rejoicing.

Consider

(30-40 minutes) Before the group meets, invite some to be prepared to read aloud a part of today's scripture. As they prepare to read, ask everyone to listen for each mention of joy and rejoicing, and for words of good news for God's people that may bring joy.

Reader 1: Philippians 4:1

Reader 2: Philippians 4:2-3

Reader 3: Philippians 4:4-7

Reader 4: Philippians 4:8-9

Reader 5: Philippians 4:10-14

Reader 6: Philippians 4:15-20

After the reading, ask your choice of these questions.

1. What did you hear as a cause for joy/rejoicing?
2. What does Paul encourage the Philippians to do and why?
3. This passage contains three sentences often used as blessings or promises that offer hope:
 - a. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (v. 7).
 - b. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (v. 13).
 - c. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (v. 19).

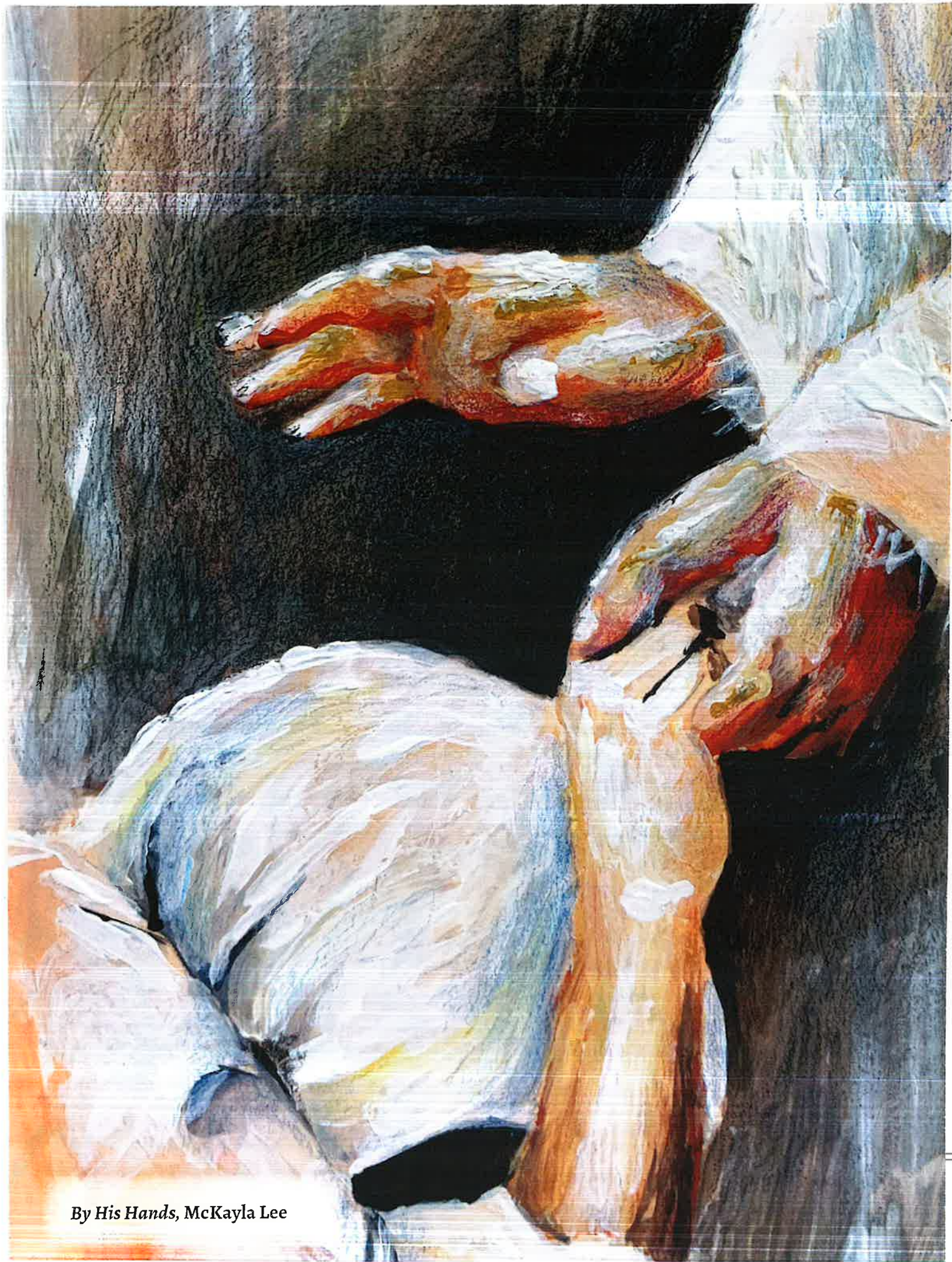
Think of a time one of these blessings/promises was true for you. Turn to a neighbor and say what that meant to you.

4. Taken by itself, verse 13 might seem to imply we can accomplish anything we put our minds to. The *Common English Bible* offers this translation: "I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength." How does the context of verses 11 and 12, and this translation, help us better understand Paul's meaning here? What do you take it to mean?
5. What might be examples of appropriate times to encourage someone with the words, "And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus"? When might offering those same words feel inappropriate or unhelpful?
6. Paul offers an ambitious challenge in verse 8: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Thinking about all these things might be overwhelming! Choose one that captures your attention. Sit in silence with it for a minute. Share your first thoughts about it with a neighbor.
7. Paul says in verse 9, "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." Paul advocates for imitation as a way to grow one's faith and one's action. Who models Christian faith for you and what are some of the things you have learned from them and seen them do that inspire your own life of discipleship? Join two or three others and briefly talk about your person. Together, thank God for the joy they have brought to your faith, and plan to thank them for their witness, if possible.

Commune and Commit

(15 minutes) The author's suggestion of making "Joy Jars" would be a wonderful way to conclude this lesson. Provide jars, glue, ribbons, and some bling to make one to take home and use to record a joy of the day. Provide paper strips and pens and ask each person to read their joy aloud, then put it in the jar. Or pass the jar around to collect the completed strips, then pass it around a second time so everyone can take one out and read it aloud. Invite the group to respond after each one is read with the words, "Rejoice in the Lord always!"

Close with the lesson's Closing Prayer.



By His Hands, McKayla Lee