

See Joy in God's Creation

PSALM 65:5-13; GENESIS 28:11-22

GOAL

Adults seek glimpses of God's glory and reflect on the abounding joy God displays in evident yet surprising ways.

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.



Visit our YouTube channel, bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR, for conversation starter videos.

PRAYER

Holy God, help me to see and savor your presence in each person who will gather to explore and practice joy. Amen.

THIS SESSION

Our faith invites us to notice, with intention, God's presence in our midst. For many, God's presence is readily apparent in nature. These images point to our Creator God who makes heaven and earth and all therein.

Even urban dwellers can catch glimpses of God's presence in the slight slivers of nature they encounter in their daily lives. The most barren and desolate lands reveal God's beauty and presence. Our faith calls us to discover the joy of God's glory in unexpected places. Practicing joy is not to merely experience joy—a passive response—but to make a faithful choice to notice joy, to seek joy, to live joy.

THE BIBLE STORY

Psalm 65:5-13 encourages us to savor the abundant beauty of God's presence in nature and to join in nature's song of praise. Through God's gift of our senses, we discover the presence of God all around us. God's people notice and relish the joy displayed in God's creation.

Genesis 28:11-22 tells of Jacob's startling encounter with God's presence, which ultimately transforms his life. After tricking his brother out of his birthright and receiving their father's blessing, Jacob was sent away to his Uncle Laban's house. He stops in the wilderness to rest for the night. In his dream of a ladder reaching to heaven, on which God's angels ascend and descend, he experiences the presence of God and receives God's blessing. Jacob awakens to exclaim, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it" (v. 16). Little did he know or expect God to accompany him on his exile to his uncle's home. Yet God shows up. Jacob rejoices!

SESSION PREPARATION

- "Closing Ritual" (p. 8): Prepare newsprint with the quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Depending on the options you choose:

- "Distractions and Invitations" (p. 5): Prepare newsprint with two columns. Column headings: "What distracts you from rejoicing in God?" and "What invites you to rejoice in God?"
- "Environmental Stewardship" (p. 6): Locate your denomination's internet resources for creation care and environmental stewardship to share with your group.
- "Germinating Seeds in a Bag" (p. 8): Gather sandwich- or snack-sized ziplock storage bags; dried, uncooked beans; paper towels; and a shallow bowl with water.

GETTING STARTED

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Welcome participants and allow time for gathering activities particular to your group, such as introductions, offering, prayer concerns, and announcements. Introduce the unit theme—Practice Joy—by reviewing the “Summary of the Practice” found in the unit overview (p. 3). Explain that a more detailed discussion of the practice can be found in the foundational essay that begins on page 45 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Distribute the *Adult Reflection Guide* and encourage participants to read that essay during the course of the next four sessions.

OPENING RITUAL

Tell participants that you will begin each session in this unit by reading together Philippians 4:4–6. Share with them that Paul wrote this letter from prison (see *Adult Reflection Guide*, p. 7). Invite participants to read in unison Philippians 4:4–6.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or more options.

CONVERSATION STARTER VIDEOS

Show the “Practice Joy Practice Overview” video and the “Practice Joy Session 1” video from the Growing Faith Resources YouTube channel (bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR). Lead a brief conversation about participants’ thoughts and questions the videos prompt as you introduce the session.

DISTRACTIONS AND INVITATIONS

Call attention to the two columns on the prepared newsprint. Distribute sticky notes and pens. Have participants write answers to the questions on separate sticky notes and stick them to the newsprint in the appropriate columns.

After most have posted, invite participants to study the various responses. Ask:

- ➔ What patterns or themes do you notice in the group’s responses?
- ➔ What choices can be made to minimize distractions from rejoicing in God?
- ➔ How can you be intentional about raising your awareness of God’s invitation to rejoice?

SEEING JOY IN CREATION

Distribute copies of Resource Page 1. Summarize the information about the writing of the hymn from the Resource Page. Have the group read the verses, sing together, or listen to this hymn as you show the YouTube video “For the Beauty of the Earth” (bit.ly/FMForTheBeauty, 2:45). Notice the references to creation and the joy and gratitude expressed. Use the questions on the Resource Page for discussion.

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- This and all sessions require that the leader and participants have their copy of the *Adult Reflection Guide* with them.

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- Internet-connected device

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- Prepared newsprint
 - Sticky notes and pens

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- Copies of Resource Page 1
 - Internet-connected device

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Choose one or both options.

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- Copies of Resource Page 2
 - Colored pencils or markers

HEARING AND ILLUSTRATING PSALM 65

Distribute colored pencils or markers and copies of Resource Page 2 to each participant. As you read each version out loud, ask them to circle or underline words and phrases that jump out at them. Then, invite them to reread the versions and use different colors to mark the words, phrases, and verses that caught their attention. Have participants select one verse and illustrate it in the margins or on the back of their paper. When participants have had enough time to complete their illustrations, ask for volunteers to share their artwork and have group members try to guess which verse is being illustrated.

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- Bibles

JACOB'S DREAM

Refer to page 9 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*, “Jacob’s Dream,” to introduce the context of this passage about Jacob’s dream, Genesis 28:11–22. Invite three volunteers to read the text aloud: narrator, God, and Jacob. Participants may listen to the reading or follow along in their Bibles. Discuss:

- ➔ Why was this dream a surprise to Jacob?
- ➔ How was God present to Jacob in the dream?
- ➔ What message did Jacob receive from God in his dream?
- ➔ Why was it significant that Jacob marked the place where he had the dream?
- ➔ How does the dream and Jacob’s encounter with God transform Jacob?
- ➔ How do you experience God’s presence in this text?
- ➔ Where do you see the connection between God’s presence and joy?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Choose one or more options.

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- Internet-connected device

ST. FRANCIS AND THE BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS

Refer to the page 11 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*, “St. Francis and the Blessing of the Animals.” Read the description of St. Francis and his appreciation of animals. Show the YouTube video “Annual Blessing of the Animals Held at Cathedral of Saint John the Divine” (bit.ly/FMBlessingAnimals, 2:00). Discuss:

- ➔ In the video, Patty Welch, chaplain of the parish school, explains that, in the blessing of the animals, “God can be seen in all things, the beautiful light of God, the beautiful love of God can be seen.” How does this annual event display God’s “beautiful love” and “beautiful light”?
- ➔ The segment reporter notes that people from around New York City flock to the cathedral to see the annual event. What do you think motivates people to come?
- ➔ In what ways is God’s joy shared and witnessed in this event?

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- Internet-connected devices

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Refer to page 11 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*, “Environmental Stewardship,” and the information about environmental stewardship and creation care as acts of faith and joyful response to God’s creation. Form

three groups and assign each group to investigate ministries for creation care using the recommended websites in their guide.

- GreenFaith (bit.ly/FMGreenFaith) to learn about “Sacred People, Sacred Earth, Day of Climate Action” and “GreenFaith Circles”
- Interfaith Power and Light (bit.ly/FMPowerAndLight)
- Your denominational website information for efforts in creation care

Have each group report to the whole about the work done by these various groups. Discuss:

- ➔ What does this group do to care for God’s creation?
- ➔ How do these efforts reflect people’s joy in God’s creation?
- ➔ How can these actions preserve God’s creation for others to find joy in it?

FINDING GOD IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

When we think of God’s joy in nature, the desert is not usually the first thing that comes to mind. Deserts are wastelands, wilderness, barren—right? Yet, throughout Scripture, God meets individuals in the desert and shows them how joy is found, even in unlikely places. Show the YouTube video “Life cycle, Rose of Jericho, resurrection plant time lapse” (bit.ly/FMRoseOfJericho, 3:01) and read Psalm 65. Consider how this video helps us understand the joy about which the psalmist writes.

- ➔ What joy can be found in a place we often presume to be barren and desolate?
- ➔ How does God make God’s self known in the desert and in places where we least expect God to show up?
- ➔ In what other places have you been surprised to find God’s presence?

Internet-connected device

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

REFLECTION DISCUSSION

Refer to the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Read the two paragraphs at the beginning of “Practicing the Practice” (p. 12). Invite participants to talk about ways they intentionally seek and savor God’s presence. Encourage them to engage in “Self-Reflection” and “Guided Meditation” (pp. 12–13) in the week ahead.

Choose one or more options.

SAVORING GOD’S PRESENCE IN NATURE

If participants are able, take a trip outside and allow 10 minutes for participants to roam (no phones, no tech) and be attentive to sounds/sights/scents/textures around them. Ask them to try and be intentional about experiencing God’s presence in their surroundings. When you gather back together, discuss:

- ➔ What was it like to be intentional about looking/listening for God in nature?
- ➔ What were the challenges?
- ➔ What unexpected surprises did you find?
- ➔ How might joy increase in your life if you spent 10–15 minutes each day in nature?



Teaching Alternative: Instead of going outdoors, participants may gather near a window and observe the outdoors. Look up at the sky. Look down to the ground. Notice the weather. Look for glimpses of God’s creation where it can be found.

SAVORING GOD’S PRESENCE IN DAILY LIFE

Ask participants to brainstorm ways to carve out moments in their daily routine to intentionally engage and savor God’s presence. Invite one or two volunteers to tell how they will use part of their routine in the coming week to find joy in God’s presence. Form accountability partners within the group and discuss ways to support one another in these actions (set alarm on phone, send a text reminder, etc.).

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- Plastic ziplock storage bags, sandwich- or snack-size
 - Dried, uncooked beans
 - Paper towels
 - Shallow bowl with water

GERMINATING SEEDS IN A BAG

Watching dried beans as they sprout is an opportunity to observe transformation and enjoy nature. Distribute storage bags, dried beans, and paper towels. Have participants fold a paper towel and dampen it with water. Place the damp paper towel in the storage bag. Place 8–10 dried beans in the bag and seal the ziplock. Participants can take the bags home and tape them to a sunny window with the beans displayed to observe their growth.

In 24 hours, the beans should begin to pop open and sprout. In three days to a week, they should be fully sprouted seeds. In a few more days, leaves should begin to emerge. Encourage participants to check on the beans daily and note the transformation. Savor this process of God’s creation.

FOLLOWING JESUS CLOSING RITUAL

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- Prepared newsprint
 - Internet-connected device

Display newsprint with the quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Joy abides with God, and it comes down from God and embraces spirit, soul, and body; and where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads, there it carries one away, there it bursts open closed doors.¹

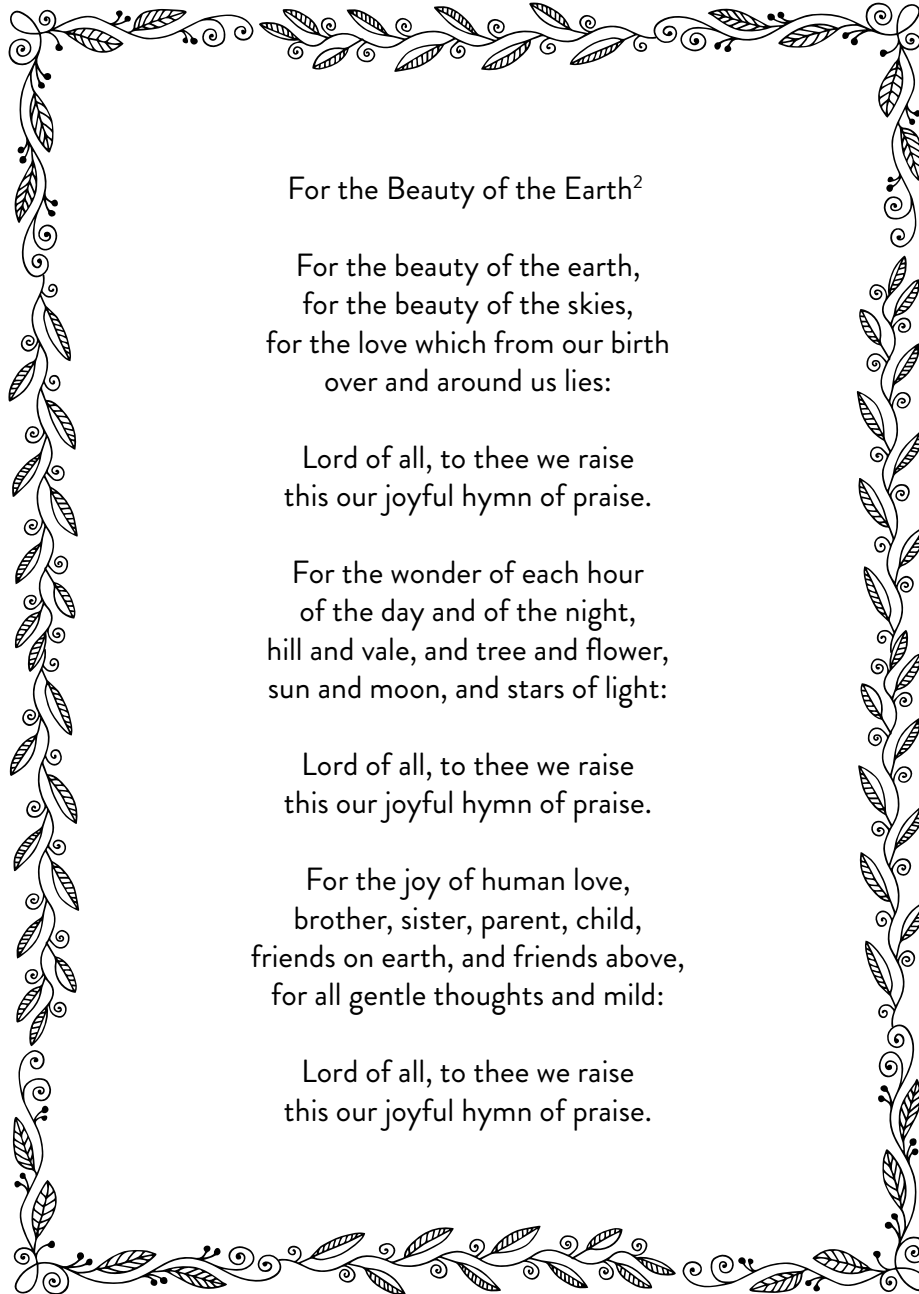
Read aloud Bonhoeffer’s quotation from the displayed newsprint. Invite participants to reflect on this lesson and how these inform their practice of joy.

Show the YouTube video “We Will Go Out with Joy - by Andrew Donaldson and Hilary Seraph Donaldson” (bit.ly/FMGoOutJoy, 2:50). Send the people out with joy.

1. [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#), Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945* (Fortress, 2006), 377–78.

For the Beauty of the Earth

Folliott S. Pierpoint wrote this hymn in 1864 as a response to the beauty he witnessed in the created world around him. In some versions of this hymn (including GtG), the refrain reads, “Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of *grateful* praise.” Other versions have, “. . . this our hymn of *joyful* praise.” What a reminder to us that joy and gratitude for God’s presence in our lives go hand in hand. We will use the second option for our exercise today.



For the Beauty of the Earth²

For the beauty of the earth,
for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies:

Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our joyful hymn of praise.

For the wonder of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower,
sun and moon, and stars of light:

Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our joyful hymn of praise.

For the joy of human love,
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above,
for all gentle thoughts and mild:

Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our joyful hymn of praise.

For discussion:

- ➔ How would you describe what the author of these lyrics was feeling when he wrote this hymn?
- ➔ When have you felt this way?
- ➔ What about this experience had you rejoicing in God and God’s presence?

2. Adapted from Folliott Sandford Pierpoint, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), #14, stanzas 1, 2, 4.

Psalm 65:5–13

NRSV: Psalm 65:5–13

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of
the farthest seas.

By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.
You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.
Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by
your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the
evening shout for joy.

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

The Message: Psalm 65:6–13

All your salvation wonders
are on display in your trophy room.
Earth-Tamer, Ocean-Pourer,
Mountain-Maker, Hill-Dresser,
Muzzler of sea storm and wave crash,
of mobs in noisy riot—
Far and wide they'll come to a stop,
they'll stare in awe, in wonder.
Dawn and dusk take turns
calling, "Come and worship."

Oh, visit the earth,
ask her to join the dance!
Deck her out in spring showers,
fill the God-River with living water.
Paint the wheat fields golden.
Creation was made for this!
Drench the plowed fields,
soak the dirt clods
With rainfall as harrow and rake
bring her to blossom and fruit.
Snow-crown the peaks with splendor,
scatter rose petals down your paths,
All through the wild meadows, rose petals.
Set the hills to dancing,
Dress the canyon walls with live sheep,
a drape of flax across the valleys.
Let them shout, and shout, and shout!
Oh, oh, let them sing!