



Animate 21 : Small Group (for groups)

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REJOICE: A Small Group Curriculum

LESSON 1

Rejoice Always

PREFACE: This is Lesson 1 of Rejoice: A Small Group Curriculum. This lesson centers around the theme, "Rejoice Always." You could use this lesson within the context of the curriculum or as a stand-alone lesson in-person or online with a small group of participants as well as a large group that has the ability to break off into smaller groups. You're welcome to use Rejoice: A Small Group Curriculum on a weekly basis or on a daily basis. Though designed with students in mind, this lesson is incredibly applicable to all ages. Individuals are welcome to use this lesson as well.

Guiding Question: What does it look like to rejoice always, no matter our circumstance?

For many young people, life is joyous and full of laughter. Unfortunately, though, some days bring about stress and anxiety from long to-do lists, upcoming tests, or friendship drama. Many students may also experience the sadness of moving to a new school, not getting into the college of their choice, or the loss of a loved one who provided much-needed stability. In all of these circumstances, scripture encourages us to rejoice always. **ALWAYS.**

We hope this first lesson can provide a space for your group to start thinking about what it means to rejoice in the Lord each day, even when it feels impossible. Because this is the first lesson, use this time intentionally to connect with one another to allow everyone to feel comfortable sharing. It is difficult to open up about moments when you did not find joy or hope in Christ, but that level of vulnerability is necessary. This first lesson should "set the table" for the kind of thoughtful, honest, and open communication we want to take place throughout the curriculum.

KEY PASSAGES: Psalm 96:11-13; Philippians 4:4-7

WHAT YOU NEED:

- BIBLE
- PENS/MARKERS
- NOTECARDS/PAPER

INTRODUCTION // 8 MINUTES

SAY: Welcome! It's so good to see all of you! We are going to start today by getting to know each other a little bit. Let's go around the circle and say our name, grade, hometown, and answer this question: If you could compete on any tv show (i.e. The Voice, Survivor, Jeopardy, etc.) which one would you choose and why?

NOTE: Put everyone in a circle, or, if online, you pick who speaks next. You start it off as the leader. Allow as much time for this as necessary. It is essential for everyone to feel comfortable going into this first lesson.

PRAY // 1 MINUTE

SAY: Thank you so much for sharing! Let's go to the Lord in prayer before beginning our lesson. - Dear Lord, thank you so much for bringing each person here today. We are so thankful that we get the chance to be together in this group to learn more about your love for us. Be with us today and guide our conversation as we read scripture together and learn to rejoice always. May we feel confident and vulnerable with one another so that we may grow closer to one another and to you, Lord. In Jesus's Name we pray, Amen.

WHAT IS "CHARA?" // 10 MINUTES

SAY: Has anyone ever heard the Greek word, chara, before? (If someone has, ask if they remember what the word means.) It's okay if you've never heard that word until right now. The word chara is Greek for "joy" or "gladness."

NOTE: At this point, you'll want to hand out a notecard or a piece of paper and a pen to everyone.

SAY: Now that you all have a notecard and pen, I want you all to draw a picture of a time when you feel your happiest. It can be a part of your routine that you do daily, or it can be a picture of one specific moment that you remember being truly joyful. Take a few minutes to remember this moment and draw it as best you can. This is not going to be a critique on anyone's artistic abilities.

Ready. Set. Go.

NOTE: Allow the students 2-3 minutes to complete this activity. Have a stopwatch on hand if you want to be very specific about your time, or to add suspense with a countdown.

NOTE: Participate in this activity yourself so that you can also share with the group. It's important for the group to feel connected and safe with you. Plus, this gives you something to do so you don't feel like you're watching them draw and think.

SAY: Time! Pens down. Take a couple seconds to look at your drawing. Remember that it's not about the quality of the drawing, but rather the memory and feeling that it invokes for you. Would anyone like to share their drawing?

NOTE: Try to allow time for 2-4 people to share their drawing. Be sure to thank each person for sharing. Some helpful questions to ask as they share are: What made you think to draw that? Was this the first moment you thought of? Is this a part of your daily routine? If not, is there a way you could work something similar into your day-to-day life?

SCRIPTURE // 5 MINUTES

SAY: Everyone open your bibles to Psalm 96.

Psalm 96 is all about being joyful before the Lord. From the beginning of this psalm, the writer tells us to "sing to Lord" over and over again. You may be thinking, 'Why should we worship God?' Verses 4 and 5 tell us: "because the LORD is great and so worthy of praise. He is awesome beyond all other gods because all the gods of the nations are just idols, but it is the LORD who created heaven!"

Let's pause there for a moment. How do you feel when you read those two verses, specifically that God is "so worthy of praise?"

NOTE: Allow one minute for your students to think about this. If no one wants to speak up, that's okay. Encourage them to continue to think for 30 seconds about the magnitude of God creating the heavens for all of us.

SAY: Let's move down a few verses in this psalm to verses 11-13. Can I get a volunteer to read these verses for me?

NOTE: If no one volunteers to read, choose someone to read. It's important for the students to be an active part of reading the scripture alongside you.

SAY (after the scripture is read): This particular passage of scripture is very dramatic and active, meaning it allows for a strong visual. Think about it: the heavens are glad - they're smiling. The earth is rejoicing - it's singing. The sea makes noise! The fields exclaim with all that they have, while the trees of the forest sing! How amazing is that? Every piece of God's creation is joyfully rejoicing as it waits for God to be near!

WAITING ON THE LORD // 10 MINUTES

NOTE: Pass out a second notecard to each student.

SAY: How do you currently occupy your time as you wait for the Lord? Often times, there are days that we feel distant from God. We feel like we cannot hear God's voice as we cry out for help. Maybe we are stressed about school or something at home, so we look to God for help. What do you do in that time as you wait to hear the voice of God? Do you sing joyfully like the

trees of the forest? Do you make a noise of praise like the sea? Or are you distracted, distressed, or angry?

As you think about this, on your second notecard, draw a picture of what you think it looks like for you to wait on the Lord in your tough circumstances.

NOTE: Allow 2 minutes for this. Again, participate in this activity alongside the students.

SAY: Stop! Time's up. Does anyone want to share what they drew or what they thought about?

NOTE: Allow 2-3 people to share. Ask the students: Where are you in that moment? How do you feel in that moment? If no one seems inclined to share, share your own.

SAY: Let's compare this card with the card we drew at the start of the lesson. Does it look different? How so?

NOTE: Pause for students to share. Allow 1-2 minutes for this. Ask them what the main differences are between the cards.

SAY: Do you think that God is more present for the moment on one card over the other? If so, which one?

NOTE: Pause for 30 seconds to listen to quick responses.

BREAKOUT GROUPS // 12 MINUTES

SAY: Did you know that even though we can't always hear the voice of God, God is there? Did you know that God cares for us when we are at our happiest as well as when we are at our lowest? We're going to move into breakout groups now to discuss this further.

NOTE: If your group size allows, breakout into groups of 3-4 people. If going through this online, stay in one group so you can continue to facilitate the flow of scripture and discussion.

SAY: Let's read another scripture passage together - this time, in the New Testament, in the book of Philippians: Philippians 4:4-7.

NOTE: Allow students a moment to flip to Philippians.

SAY: Have someone in your small group read Philippians 4:4-7, or you can each read a verse at a time.

NOTE: Allow each group the time to read the passage together.

SAY: There's a good chance you may have heard parts of this passage before. In your groups, discuss whether or not you've ever heard this passage, as well as one piece of the passage that really stood out to you.

NOTE: Allow 1-2 minutes for groups to discuss. If time allows, encourage one person from each group to share with the large group what was discussed.

SAY: This passage in Philippians commands us to rejoice in the Lord always. In your groups, discuss this question: Do you find yourself talking to God more in those moments of joy, or more in those moments of stress and isolation? Why?

NOTE: Allow 1-2 minutes for groups to discuss. If time allows, encourage one person from each group to share with the large group what was discussed.

NOTE: If you're doing these questions online, they can all be answered as a large group.

WRAP UP // 3 MINUTES

SAY: To rejoice as scripture describes is much more than transient earthly happiness. Instead, true joy is born out of a deep, profound abiding faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We must learn for our faith and hope in God to rest not on our own confidence and emotions, but in something much stronger: the love of God. God is always listening to us, always preparing a way for us, always loving us. Yes, there may be days when we feel distant from God - maybe those isolating days in waiting seen on our second notecard - but what we ultimately want is that joy we saw depicted on that first card.

This does not mean that every day will feel like we do sitting front row at our favorite concert, or feel like a day on the beach. We will continue to struggle, but when we rely on God rather than our own strengths, we will know a joy and a hope so great, we cannot help but to rejoice always! We will rejoice because our confidence is not our own successes and comforts, but in the unconditional, never-failing love of God.

Over the next couple lessons, we are going to continue to explore how to rejoice even in the midst of our own sadness, insecurities, and doubts. We will learn how to rejoice always.

CLOSING PRAYER // 1 MINUTE

SAY: Thank you all so much for your vulnerability and listening ears today. Let's pray to end our time together. - Dear God, thank you for these moments shared together. Thank you for the vulnerability seen from each person in this group. As we leave this group today, may we grow in our trust in who you say you are. May we continue to lean not on our own understanding, but in the truth that your love never fails us. We are grateful to know a God that encourages us to present our requests before them so that we may rejoice always. Let us go now in peace and joy! **Amen.**

REJOICE: A Small Group Curriculum

LESSON 2

Continue in Joy

PREFACE: This is Lesson 2 of Rejoice: A Small Group Curriculum. This lesson focuses on the relationship between rejoicing and lament, and how we as Christians are called to journey through both in joy.

Guiding Question: What is the difference between “happiness” and “rejoicing?” How do we find the strength to rejoice in moments where we must also lament?

In Lesson 1, we discussed the importance of rooting ourselves in something stronger than our own accomplishments or confidence: the unfailing love of God. Only through the acceptance of God’s love will we have the strength to rejoice always. Lesson 2 builds off of that by addressing more specifically how we continue in joy through the deepest of valleys when all we want to do is cry out to the Lord in sadness.

As you prepare to lead this discussion, think about a time in your own life where you did not see a way out on your own, a time that felt dark and hopeless. Thinking about what this moment is for you will help you guide the students through thinking about what that moment is in their life. For some students, they may have already experienced tremendous loss through the death of a family member, a family divorce, or moving far away from friends.

Other students may identify their deep valley as the day their best friend said they could no longer be friends. Or maybe they felt their lowest when they did not get into the school of their choice. Whatever struggles your group shares, be sure to validate each struggle. The point of this lesson is not to see who has overcome the most, but rather to look at how we rejoice in the Lord through deep sadness of all kinds.

KEY PASSAGES: Psalm 13:1-6; John 16:17-24

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Bible
- Pen
- Whiteboard/chalkboard
- Dry erase markers/chalk

INTRODUCTION // 8 MINUTES:

SAY: Welcome back, everyone! It is so good to see all of you again! Today we have another ice breaker question to get us started. This time I want to know: would you rather be able to talk to animals, or read people's minds? Who wants to share first?

NOTE: Put everyone in a circle, or, if online, you pick who speaks next. Allow as much time for this as necessary. Share your answer to conclude before the prayer.

PRAYER // 1 MINUTE:

SAY: Thank you all for sharing! Before we dive into the rest of our time, let's pray together: Dear God, we thank you for another day together as a group. We praise you for the ways you have already begun to reveal yourself to us in our first lesson. Be with us today as we look closely to your word and discover what it means to continue through our dark valleys. Lord, we ask that you be near us today as we share with one another vulnerable truths and ask brave questions. Fill this room with your Spirit's comforting presence of peace. In your name we pray, **Amen**.

SHOUT IT OUT // 10 MINUTES:

SAY: In our first lesson together, we talked about the importance of rejoicing always! We learned that God cares about us on our best days and our worst days. Our ability to rejoice always hinges on our understanding that God's love for us is steadfast. You may have thought after Lesson 1, "Well, what do I do on those days that feel too scary or too sad to focus on God's love?" or "What do I do when I feel alone in my sadness?" Or, maybe you feel like no one can understand what you're going through and relate to your sadness. We're going to look at some scripture in a few minutes that will hopefully begin to guide you through those thoughts and feelings.

NOTE: If you're meeting in-person and have access to a white board or chalkboard, that's ideal for this next activity. If not, a poster board or sheet of paper works. If doing this online, you can type into a word document and share your screen with the group, or utilize the group chat feature.

SAY: What I want you guys to do is shout out some things that make you happy! I'm going to write them all on the board for us to see. So, shout it out! What makes you happy?

NOTE: Take about 1 or 2 minutes to do this. Make sure everyone gets to share at least one thing. Share what makes you happy, too!

SAY: Great job, everyone! Thanks for sharing! Now, let's think about the opposite emotion of happiness: sadness. Take a moment to think if you need to, but start shouting out what makes you sad or a time when you felt low. I can start while you all keep thinking.

NOTE: Students may need a little bit more time to think through this or be ready to share, so allow a couple minutes of space for this. Be sure to share something that makes you sad, too, so they feel like you're being vulnerable alongside them.

SAY: Thank you all so much for sharing with the group. I know it can be hard to own up to what makes us sad, or even happy. We're going to come back to everything on the board in a little bit.

NOTE: Stop sharing your screen if you are online.

SCRIPTURE // 12 MINUTES:

SAY: Everyone grab your bibles and turn to Psalm 13:1-6. This psalm is an example of a lament. Does anyone know what it means to lament? (Pause to see if anyone can define the word.) It's a difficult word to define because lamenting can look different for everyone, but essentially it means to feel deep sadness over something. For some people, lamenting might look like crying out over the loss of a loved one. For others, it may look like writing down their questions and confusions about a tough situation.

Let's read Psalm 13 together, only verses 1-4 for now, to hear David's words of lament to God. Will someone read the first four verses for us?

NOTE: If no one volunteers to read, choose someone to read. It's important for the students to be an active part of reading the scripture alongside you.

SAY: (after the first four verses are read) What is the overall emotion you feel when reading this passage?

NOTE: Allow about 30 seconds for this response.

SAY: Were there any words or phrases that stood out to you in this first part of the scripture so far?

NOTE: Allow about 30 seconds for this response, too.

SAY: Now, let's look at the last two verses of this lament. Can I get another volunteer to read verses 5-6?

NOTE: If no one volunteers to read, choose someone to read.

SAY: (after the scripture has been read) What is the overall emotion you feel when reading these verses?

NOTE: Allow about 30 seconds for this response.

SAY: Were there any words or phrases that stood out to you in these two verses?

NOTE: Allow about 30 seconds for this response, too.

SAY: What do you think changed for David between how he felt in verses 1-4 and how he felt in verses 5-6?

NOTE: Allow a minute or 2 to discuss this idea.

SAY: David's tone shifts as we move into verse 5. He says he trusts in the steadfast love of God to get him through this pit of sadness in which he finds himself. He says in verse 6 that the Lord has taken care of him before, so he knows God will do it again. He remembers that God is a god of love and protection.

SHARED UNDERSTANDING // 10 MINUTES:

SAY: Let's think back to our own confessions of sadness from earlier.

NOTE: Look back at the answers on the white board or begin sharing your screen again to show the responses from earlier.

SAY: I'm going to pick a couple examples of sadness for us to discuss, but if it's one that you shared, I don't want you to say anything about it.

NOTE: Pick one example to start.

SAY: Why would this particular moment make someone feel sad?

NOTE: Take about 30 seconds to discuss this example. The goal here is to cultivate a shared understanding of what one another has gone through or is going through currently. Continue choosing 3 or 4 more examples and ask everyone but the original sharer to contribute why that moment could be sad for someone.

SAY: Thank you all for thinking through those examples with me. In looking back through that list, we are able to understand what our friends in the group are going through, or have been through in the past. By naming what's hard about those moments, we are encouraged to put ourselves in their shoes. Hopefully, as you heard people discussing the example you shared, you realize that your sadness is justified. Often when we are sad, we think no one will understand us if we try to talk through it with others. But as we just saw, people can surprise you with their understanding. More importantly, God will always understand your sadness. This is both because God is all-knowing, AND because God has experienced sadness and suffering, too.

BREAKOUT GROUPS // 8 MINUTES:

SAY: Jesus is the Son of God, and he suffered and died on the cross for us to take on the pain and death of our sins so that we don't have to. The pain that Jesus endured on the cross is unimaginable. He did this as a sacrifice for us. Because Jesus suffered such terrible pain and despair, he understands those moments when we cry out to God in confusion and sadness.

NOTE: If your group size allows, breakout into groups of 3-4 people. If going through this online, stay in one group so you can continue to facilitate the flow of scripture and discussion.

SAY: In your breakout group, read through John 16:17-24. These verses show Jesus helping his disciples work through their emotions after learning that Jesus is going to die on the cross. It's an incredibly sad and dark time for them. Read through these verses as a group. Circle or underline phrases or emotions that stand out to you.

NOTE: Allow each group the time to read the passage together.

SAY: Based off of what you read, how do you think the disciples felt at this time?

NOTE: Allow about 30 seconds for response.

SAY: What does Jesus say or do to encourage his disciples in this moment?

NOTE: Allow another 30 seconds for this response.

WRAP UP // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: Jesus comforts his disciples in this moment. He shares stories and examples that they will understand. He says, "I know it's confusing, but soon you will understand." When we feel sad, we need that comfort from the Lord. We need that understanding that God understands our sadness. I think one way we can see this is by confessing our sadness to others like we did earlier and like we see the disciples do in this passage in John. When we share the truth of our lives with others, we cultivate much deeper relationships with those around us and with Jesus. If we try to carry all of our struggles on our own, we will eventually break under the pressure of it all.

SAY: How did it feel earlier to share your sadness and have everyone in the group try to understand it?

NOTE: Allow 1 minute for this response.

SAY: It is powerful to share emotions with one another and begin to understand one another deeper, but even this excitement pales in comparison to the deep spiritual joy found in knowing that God understands you. God hears your cries. God feels your despair. God knows your confusion. God cares that you are sad. It is through an understanding community like this

one, and through an all-knowing, always-loving God that you will know true spiritual joy in the midst of your darkest spaces.

CLOSING PRAYER // 1 MINUTE:

SAY: Dear God, we are so thankful for this space to be able to share and confess what fills us with joy and what fills us with despair. I am so thankful for the vulnerability of each person here. Lord, I pray that your Spirit continues to show this group what it means to be consistently loved and never judged by you. May we continue to challenge ourselves and each other to come before you in both sadness and joy and ask to be filled with your love and strength and not our own. In your name we pray, Amen.

REJOICE: A Small Group Curriculum

LESSON 3

Be Strong in Joy

PREFACE: This is Lesson 3 of Rejoice: A Small Group Curriculum. This lesson focuses on how we respond to the convictions of our sins, and how we are welcomed by God into holy restoration rather than shame.

Guiding Question: How does God react to the presence of sin in our life? How does God want us to react to the presence of sin in our life?

As human beings we are constantly making mistakes and falling short of the glory of God. We consistently do the exact thing we swore we would never do. Lesson 3 is going to take a closer look at how God sees our sin, as well as how God wants us to see that sin our life. When we are forced to face our sins, our initial reaction is typically guilt, shame, or defensiveness. God does not desire these feelings for us. God desires joy for all of his children.

So how do we find joy in the midst of acknowledging our sin? Nehemiah 8:10 boldly proclaims, "Don't be sad, because the joy of the Lord is your strength!" Lesson 3 is going to explore how broken people are invited into the restorative work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of our sins. Our weeping turns to dancing as we experience the joy of God who is forgiving, gracious, and compassionate.

KEY PASSAGES: Nehemiah 8:5-11

WHAT YOU NEED:

- BIBLE
- PENS/MARKERS

INTRODUCTION // 10 MINUTES:

SAY: Welcome! So excited to have all of you back for another day! Did anyone do anything fun since the last time we were together?

NOTE: Allow a minute or two for students to talk about what they did the night before, or however long it's been since you were last together.

SAY: That all sounds like so much fun! To introduce our time together today, we're going to play a quick game of Never Have I Ever! I've got a few examples I'm going to read out. Everyone put 10 fingers up, and if I call out something you've done, put a finger down. Shout out when you've put all 10 fingers down. I'll play along, too!

NOTE: Feel free to pause to let people share any stories that may come up throughout their confessions!

EXAMPLES:

1. Never have I ever been skiing.
2. Never have I ever been in a school play.
3. Never have I ever scored the winning point, touchdown, goal, etc. in a game.
4. Never have I ever met someone famous.
5. Never have I ever had Taco Bell.
6. Never have I ever had a pet other than a cat or dog.
7. Never have I ever been to a concert.
8. Never have I ever dyed my hair.
9. Never have I ever held a snake.
10. Never have I ever moved states.

SAY: Thanks for playing along! That game is always such a fun way to hear unexpected stories from one another!

PRAYER // 2 MINUTES:

SAY: Let's pray together now before we get to the heart of today's lesson: Dear God, thank you for another day to be together and learn about what you have to teach us about joy in our weakness. God, you are our strength. We are broken people and you are the one who can hold us all together. You desire love and joy for us, so Lord, may we look to you for our hope and peace rather than inwardly toward our own achievements. We love you, Lord. Be with us as we move into our lesson today. In your name we pray, Amen.

RESTORATION DEFINED // 3 MINUTES:

SAY: Throughout this lesson, we will be discussing the theme of "restoration." Before we get started, does anyone know what the word "restoration" means?

NOTE: Allow about 30 seconds for students to think or share.

SAY: "Restoration" refers to the process of returning something to its original condition, essentially making it look or feel brand new once more. Have you ever heard of or seen someone who restores old cars? This means they take old cars and repair them by fixing the engine, buying new parts, or adding fresh paint, and soon enough they look like the day their original owner bought them!

So when we hear about God's hope of restoration for us and all of creation, this means that God hopes for us to find the joy and love that he intended for us to know at the start of creation. Sin became a part of this world in the Garden of Eden, and that causes us to sin. But God's hope for restoration describes God's desire for us to know joy and confidence in God alone once more.

Let's look at scripture to see how people before us have made sense of this theme of restoration.

SCRIPTURE// 25 MINUTES:

SAY: Let's look at the book of Nehemiah. Has anyone read anything out of Nehemiah before?

NOTE: Pause for a moment to see if anyone has heard of the book of Nehemiah.

SAY: It's not a book that gets talked about a lot in sermons or small group discussions normally. Does anyone know where Nehemiah is in the Bible?

NOTE: Pause for a moment to see if anyone knows.

SAY: Quick! Let's see who can find Nehemiah first! Go!

NOTE: Give everyone a few seconds to find Nehemiah in their bibles. Once someone finds it, help everyone else find it. Let everyone know it's about halfway through the Old Testament – after Ezra and before Esther.

SAY: I'm really excited for us to read from Nehemiah today because it gives a glimpse at what life was like in the Old Testament. In the passage we are going to read today, a guy named Ezra is going to read through the Book of Law to the people, which are the same laws we have in the Bible today. Let's break out into pairs or groups of three to read through Nehemiah 8:5-9. As a note, don't worry about all the wild names in verse 7. Do the best you can!

NOTE: Help your group break out into pairs or threes if your numbers allow. Give the groups about 2 minutes to read through the verses.

SAY: Alright, let's come back together now. Ezra is reading the law to the people, but what are they doing as he reads? Does anyone remember?

NOTE: If they need a hint, point them to look back at the end of verse 9.

SAY: The people are weeping! Why do you think the people would be crying while Ezra reads out the laws that God has instructed to them?

NOTE: Pause for a moment and take note of their answers.

SAY: The people were weeping because as Ezra called out the laws they realized how often they failed to obey God's commandments to them. With every law that was read aloud, someone in the room felt shame for not obeying God. Their tears were tears of guilt and sadness.

Has anyone ever felt like they've let someone down before? Maybe a parent, a friend, or a teacher? How do you feel when you know you've let someone down?

NOTE: Pause for responses. Share your own, too.

SAY: It's not a fun feeling to know that you've disappointed someone. If a parent asks you to do something and you don't meet their expectations, you feel sadness and guilt. We can let ourselves down, too, right? Often we set goals for ourselves, and if we don't meet them, we feel like a failure. We feel like we aren't good enough. All of those emotions affect our self-worth over time. We start to lean into that guilt and shame and listen to it.

For the people in the book of Nehemiah, they begin weeping while Ezra reads the law because they are listening to those feelings of guilt and shame. As he reads, they think, I am not worthy of the love of God. I have not followed the law, so I am sure I have lost the love of God.

Let's see what happens next in verses 10-11, though. Can I get a volunteer to read?

NOTE: If no one volunteers, you read.

SAY: What does Nehemiah say to the people in verse 10?

NOTE: Pause for answers.

SAY: Nehemiah tells them this is a holy day, so their crying must cease. It is not a day to mourn, but a day to be glad in. Why?

NOTE: Pause for answers.

SAY: Because "the joy of the Lord is your strength!" What do you think this means for those people and for us?

NOTE: Pause for answers.

SAY: The joy of the Lord is found along the road of restoration. When God convicts of sin, our first reaction is often guilt, shame, and sadness; but our weeping turns to dancing as we experience the joy of God who is forgiving, gracious, and compassionate. As God restores us to everlasting peace and joy, we are empowered to join the Holy Spirit's work of restoration in the world around us, strengthened by the joy of the Lord at work in and through us.

WRAP UP // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: Who remembers what the word “restoration” means?

NOTE: Pause for answers.

SAY: Restoration refers to the process of making something new or returning it to its original form. For us as Christians, God restores us to be made whole even though we are broken by human, earthly standards. God invites the Holy Spirit to renew our hearts with the truth that God loves us no matter what. God does not have a conditional love for us that only exists when we accomplish certain tasks. God loves us just as we are right where we are.

So, for the people in Nehemiah, God loves them even though they don't always keep the law. God desires the best for them, and God has set before them a way of life, but God does not turn against them if they fail to meet that expectation.

The same is true for us. God desires for us to live a pure and holy life. But if we mess up, God does not want us to feel shame or guilt and run from him. Rather, those are the moments God wants us to run faster toward him in joy for knowing that we are safe and loved. God will never leave us, and that is something worth praising and rejoicing!

PRAYER // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: Does anyone have any prayer requests before closing out today?

NOTE: Take a moment for prayer requests.

SAY: Would anyone like to volunteer to pray to close us out?

NOTE: If no one volunteers, feel free to pray the following:

SAY: Dear Lord, we thank you for your steadfast love. How amazing it is to know that we can run toward you when we have failed. We never have to feel shame before you God because you are not a God who guilts us. You are a God who wraps us up and loves us every day every hour through every moment. Lord, we are so thankful that we are loved by you in this way. May it be an inspiration for how we love others. We pray this your name, Jesus, Amen.

REJOICE: A Small Group Curriculum

LESSON 4

Lead in Joy

PREFACE: This is Lesson 4 of Rejoice: A Small Group Curriculum. This lesson looks at John 15, and the imagery Jesus presents of the “true vine” and its branches. Together we look at how we can creatively lead others in the joy we have found in Christ Jesus.

Guiding Question: How do we share the good news of great joy that comes from the Lord with everyone we encounter? What does it mean to be one with the “true vine?”

Over the last three lessons, we have looked at the theme of declaring joy in all things – in our lowest moments and our highest points. In today’s lesson, we are going to look at Jesus’s imagery of the vine and its branches and what this means for us as disciples. It is now our task as Christians to continue to lead in joy for everyone we meet.

In what ways is God calling us to live out the joy we have found in knowing him? Furthermore, what does it mean for our joy to be complete in Christ?

KEY PASSAGES: John 15:11

WHAT YOU NEED:

- BIBLE
- PENS/MARKERS
- PAPER

INTRODUCTION // 10 MINUTES:

SAY: Hello everyone! We are over halfway through with our lessons at this point! How is everyone feeling at this point?

NOTE: Take a moment to listen to where everyone is emotionally, as well as to answer any lingering questions from previous lessons before moving forward.

SAY: To start today off, I'm going to give you part of a movie quote, and you guys need to complete the movie quote AND tell me the name of the movie! If you don't get it right away, I can give you some "multiple choice" options.

1. "Toto, I've got a feeling _____" (ANSWER: Wizard of Oz; "...we're not in Kansas anymore.")
 - a. "...we took a wrong turn somewhere"
 - b. "...we're not in Kansas anymore"
 - c. "...a storm's coming"
 - d. "...you need to go to the bathroom"
2. "Fish are friends, _____" (ANSWER: Finding Nemo; "...not food.")
 - a. "...not enemies"
 - b. "Be nice."
 - c. "...not food"
 - d. "Say hello."
3. "Ogres are like _____." (ANSWER: Shrek; "...onions.")
 - a. Onions
 - b. Monsters
 - c. Sandwiches
 - d. Humans
4. "Life's like a box of chocolates, _____." (ANSWER: Forrest Gump; "...you never know what you're gonna get.")
 - a. "...full of goodness"
 - b. "...lots of surprises"
 - c. "...you never know what you're gonna get"
 - d. "...want all of it"
5. "Oh yes, the past can hurt. But, you can either run from it or..." (ANSWER: The Lion King; "...learn from it")
 - a. "...learn from it"
 - b. "...face it"
 - c. "...hide from it"
 - d. "...ask for help"

PRAYER // 1 MINUTE:

SAY: Great job, everyone! We're going to do some more with movies and tv in a second. For now, let's say a prayer before we get started with today's lesson: Dear God, thank you for another day to gather together. You are the source of all of our joy. Apart from you we do not know real joy. Be with each of us now as look to your Word to guide our conversation. In your name we pray, Amen.

FAMOUS DUOS // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: So, I told you guys earlier we would come back to movies and tv! I want all of you to shout out some famous duos you know!

NOTE: Feel free to write these down on a whiteboard if you have one. If you're doing this on Zoom, depending on your group size, it might work better to have people submit the names of the duos into the chat.

NOTE: For the next part, you'll need to rely on the examples shared.

SAY: Thanks for sharing those examples. So thinking back to what's been shared, they're all famous duos because they complete one another. You can't have Shaggy without Scooby or Tom without Jerry (or insert your own group's examples). They are joined together.

In a similar, but even more profound way, this is what Jesus wants for us in our relationship with him. Jesus wants us to be so attached to him that our identity is fully intertwined with his.

DRAW A TREE // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: Before we read the scripture for today, everyone grab a pen and a sheet of paper. I want each of you to draw a tree. You've got 30 seconds, go!

NOTE: Set a timer for 30 seconds.

SAY: Alright, stop! Everyone show what your drawing looks like!

NOTE: Take a couple seconds to appreciate everyone's drawing.

SAY: Hold your drawing up if you included branches on your tree.

SAY: If you didn't put any branches on your tree, go ahead and add them now. Make sure those branches have blooms or leaves, too.

SCRIPTURE // 20 MINUTES:

SAY: Once you've done this, open your bible to John 15. You can set your drawing to the side while we read scripture. Can I get a volunteer to read the first few verses, John 15:1-4?

NOTE: If no one volunteers, pick someone.

SAY: (After reading verse 4) Let's look at our drawings of trees and its branches. How do these first 4 verses relate to your drawing?

NOTE: Give them a few minutes to think through this.

SAY: When you drew branches onto your tree, are they attached to the tree? Or are they on their own?

NOTE: Give them a couple seconds to respond to this.

SAY: They are attached to the tree because the tree and its branches are one. The branches cannot exist without the tree. Yes, branches can fall off the tree, but they will not continue to flourish once they are detached from the tree. Let's keep reading. Let's look at John 15:5-8 now. Can I get another volunteer to read?

NOTE: If no one volunteers, pick someone.

SAY: (After reading verse 8) What does it mean in verse 5 when Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches?"

NOTE: Give them a couple seconds to respond to this.

SAY: Jesus is making the analogy we can see through your pictures of the trees that he is the source of growth. He is the vine or the tree, and we are the branches that grow from that source. We cannot grow apart from Jesus because he is the source. Just like we said a branch that falls from a tree can't keep growing, Jesus is saying we cannot have true joy and life apart from him. Does this make sense?

NOTE: Give them a couple seconds to respond to this.

SAY: One last thing before moving onto our last bit of scripture: what does Jesus say in verse 8 is his father's glory?

NOTE: Give them a couple seconds to respond to this.

SAY: What does it mean for God's glory or desire to be for us to bear much fruit and show ourselves to be his disciples? How can we do these things in our day-to-day life?

NOTE: Give them a couple minutes to respond to this.

SAY: For our final section of scripture, let's look at John 15:9-12. Can I get one last volunteer to read for me?

NOTE: If no one volunteers, you can read these verses.

SAY: We've been talking all throughout our time together about the idea of joy in all things. With that in mind, what does it mean to "remain in God's love," as we read in verse 9?

NOTE: Give them a couple minutes to respond to this.

SAY: For me, I think it means to always cling to the truth and love of God even when things in life feel tough around us. When we think about leading in joy, that becomes increasingly hard

to do when we are no longer attached to the true vine of Jesus. When we try to go off and grow apart from God, we will no longer be able to know true complete joy. God gives us hope that is greater than anything this world can give us.

LIVE IT OUT // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: Going forward, what are some ways that you want to challenge yourself to remain in God's love? What are some times that you usually find yourself straying away from the joy of the Lord and moving toward your own desires or reactions?

NOTE: Give them a couple minutes to respond to this.

SAY: What are some ways you can use your creative gifts to live out the joy you can find in God?

NOTE: Give them a couple minutes to respond to this.

WRAP UP // 2 MINUTES:

SAY: As we wrap up today, I want you guys to hold onto your pictures that you drew of the tree. Keep that image in your mind, or with you physically. It will help you more than you know to remember that Jesus is the ultimate source of hope, joy, and life. When we have days that we feel discouraged or defeated, we can remember that we are still attached to the vine of Jesus Christ, and it is through this that we will be given life everlasting.

PRAYER // 2 MINUTES:

SAY: Are there any prayer requests to end today's lesson?

NOTE: Take a moment for requests.

SAY: Can I get a volunteer to pray for us?

NOTE: You can be done after someone closes in prayer. Remind them that there is only one lesson left!

REJOICE: A Small Group Curriculum

LESSON 5

Go in Joy

PREFACE: This is Lesson 5 of Rejoice: A Small Group Curriculum. This is the final lesson of the Animate curriculum, so this lesson will focus on the question, “Where do we go from here?”

Guiding Question: Where do I see God in my life, and how can this shape how I share joy with others? How would Jesus Christ live my life if he was me?

Over the last four lessons we have looked at the meaning of joy and the importance of finding joy in Christ. For this lesson, students will be encouraged and challenged to name the joy in their lives. Specifically, we want students to understand where God is in their lives and how this challenges them to spread joy with others.

You cannot tell others about something you don't fully understand yourself, so we want students to think during today's lessons about moments that they felt the love of Christ in their lives. Once they are able to name these moments, they will be able to turn and share those stories with others.

KEY PASSAGES: Psalm 16:1-2; Philippians 1:3-6

WHAT YOU NEED:

- BIBLE
- PENS/MARKERS
- PAPER

INTRODUCTION // 10 MINUTES:

SAY: Hi everyone! Welcome to your final lesson of Animate! Are you excited to be done, or sad?

NOTE: If it helps your group, ask them to give you a thumbs up or a thumbs down as to how they're feeling.

SAY: We have one final ice breaker question for all of you, and it's a big one! If you only had 24 hours to live, what would you do?

NOTE: As usual give them a few minutes to answer this. If you need extra time, take it since it's the last lesson. Be sure to share your own thoughts.

SAY: Thanks so much for sharing those thoughts with me. One guiding question I want you guys to think about today is this: "How would Jesus Christ live my life?" I'm sure you've all heard the phrase, "What would Jesus do?" But really, what would Jesus do if he were you? If Jesus was your age, with your family, in your school, what would Jesus do with his last 24 hours on earth? I don't want you to say anything out loud right now, but be thinking about that as we work through today's lesson.

PRAYER // 2 MINUTES:

SAY: Let's pray before our time together.

NOTE: Offer the invitation to pray to someone in the group. If no one offers, pray the prayer below.

SAY: Dear God, be with us now as we prepare to discuss our final lesson of this week together. It has been such a blessing to spend time with this group over the last few sessions. I pray for each student as they spend this time together thinking through moments they have seen you and known you in the lives. I pray that they continue to have these experiences moving forward. Thank you for the ways you care for us and love us, Lord, even when we aren't paying attention. You are a good and faithful God. It's in your name we pray, Amen.

SCRIPTURE // 10 MINUTES

SAY: Today we're going to jump right into scripture. Let's look at Psalm 16. Take a second to find this in your bibles and let me know when you get there.

SAY: Can I get a volunteer to read the first two verses for me?

NOTE: If no one volunteers, pick someone to read verses 1-2.

SAY: Thanks for reading! In verse 1, David cries out to God and calls the Lord his "refuge." What does it mean for God to be our refuge?

NOTE: Take about 30 seconds to field responses to this question.

SAY: A refuge is a safe space, specifically a safe space for people escaping danger. "Refugees" are people who are fleeing an unsafe place, and seeking safety or "refuge" in a new place. Does that make sense?

NOTE: This next bit is a personal anecdote, but feel free to adopt it as your own.

SAY: There's a church in Tennessee that named their student space "The Refuge" because they want that building to serve as a safe place for all of their students. No matter where they're coming from, all of those students can find a home and safety in that place. I think that's such a beautiful picture of who God is for all of you.

SAY: So in verse 1 when we hear David call God his refuge, he is putting all of his trust in the Lord by saying this. In verse 2, David says, "You are my lord: apart from you..." what? Who can tell me?

NOTE: Pause for response to this. Point them back to verse 2 if they are confused.

SAY: David says, "...apart from you I have NO GOOD THING," or "NOTHING GOOD," as my bible translation reads. How does this idea relate to what we talked about in our last lesson about the vine and the branches?

NOTE: Give them a minute to discuss how this relates to the last lesson.

SAY: We discussed last time that we do not grow apart from God. If our branch is separated from the vine of Christ, we cannot flourish. So in the same way, David is saying, "Apart from you, God, I do not know real joy or life."

FINDING JOY // 15 MINUTES:

SAY: For the next few minutes, what I want you guys to do is take a pen and piece of paper or journal and write down three (or more) moments where you feel like you have known full joy because of God. Think about a time that you were truly happy, similar to that very first week we met, and think about how this relates to your relationship with God. It can be something simple like a day you went for a walk in your neighborhood with a friend and it led to great conversation, or it could be a moment while worshipping at church. Just think about at least three moments you felt deep joy and think about how you can see God in that moment. Let's take about 7 minutes to do this. I'm going to do it, too.

NOTE: Either set a timer on your phone or watch the clock. If you feel like your group needs more time for this, feel free to extend this activity. Don't spend more than 10 minutes on this, though.

SAY: Our time is up for this first exercise. What I want you to do now is partner up and share on moment on your list with that person. If we have to have one group of three that's fine, but I really want this to be partnered if possible.

NOTE: If you're on Zoom, assign partners, and have them privately chat to one another a moment from their list. If it's not overwhelming, you could also send them to breakout groups in pairs.

SAY: Let's take about three minutes to share with each other. If you want to share more than one moment feel free, but make sure you each share at least one first. Say what the moment is and how you felt God in that moment. Ready. Set. Go.

NOTE: Either set a timer on your phone or watch the clock for 3 minutes.

SHARING JOY // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: How was that experience for all of you?

NOTE: Give about a minute to see if anyone has any feedback.

SAY: I'm really excited that you all had the opportunity to partner up in that way to share because that's what it looks like to share the joy of Christ with others. Often when we hear about the importance of sharing the gospel or the joy of Christ, it feels very intimidating. It can feel like you aren't ready for that conversation. But we just saw that all it takes is sharing one little moment where we believed in God to spread the joy of Christ. When we talk to a friend and say, "I'm so thankful to God for some unexpected alone time today," that shows our friend that our joy comes from the Lord and not ourselves. Does that make sense?

NOTE: Pause here to see if anyone has any questions.

SAY: How were you able to see God in the conversations you had with your partner?

NOTE: If no one volunteers, call on a couple partners to share their experience.

SCRIPTURE // 5 MINUTES:

SAY: I want us to read through one final piece of scripture together. It's in the book of Philippians, chapter 1. Take a second to find it in your bibles. It's in the New Testament.

SAY: I'll read this scripture for us. We're reading Philippians 1:3-6.

NOTE: Read scripture aloud to the group.

SAY: I really wanted to end with this scripture today because it's Paul's words to the people of Philippi. He's encouraging them in their faith, which is how I want to send you all out today. You all have gone through these five lessons as a group and shared your faith with one another. Paul writes in this passage that he is thankful for his partners in the gospel. He thanks God when he remembers these people. I want the same to be true for you all. I hope you thank the Lord when you remember this group and this time together. You are all partnered in the gospel together.

You have been partners in this pursuit of the gospel this whole time, but specifically today as you trusted one another with your stories and joy.

SAY: What are some moments throughout our time together where you will remember God working? What are some moments where you grew closer to the joy of the Lord in this process? I'd love for a couple people to share!

NOTE: Allow about 1-2 minutes for this. If a lot of people want to share, take more time.

WRAP UP // 2 MINUTES:

SAY: As you go from this place today, I hope you feel equipped to go out in joy to everyone that you know and share that joy with others. It can be done in such small, simple ways, such as reaching out to a friend that you know has been struggling. You can say "I've been praying for you and thinking about you." Or it can be a big reach out, like inviting them to church or a retreat with you so that they can hear more about the love that Jesus has for them.

However you choose to show joy, I pray that you do it full of the love and power of Christ.

SAY: Does anyone have any questions before we wrap up today?

NOTE: Take a moment to see if anyone has any relevant questions for the week.

PRAYER // 2 MINUTES:

SAY: Does anyone have any prayer requests?

NOTE: Take a moment for any requests.

SAY: Let's bow our heads in prayer. Dear Lord, we are so thankful. So thankful for time to sit and learn from our partners in the faith. We are so joyful that we get to be before a loving God and learn from each other. We have spent so much time together reading your word and praying for a life full of your joy. May we leave this place today full of your spirit and joy ready to share it with all those we meet. We pray that your love would pour out from us in the way we speak and act toward others, Lord. Be with us as we share all that we've learned with others now that our time is over. Thank you for each student gathered today, Lord. It's in your name we pray, Amen.