

1-1-1999

"Rejoice in the Lord Always"

John Richter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richter, John (1999) ""Rejoice in the Lord Always," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 14.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss3/14>

This Meditation is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

“Rejoice in the Lord Always”

A Thanksgiving Meditation

By John Richter

In Philippians, Paul writes not from the perspective of one who enjoys the comforts this life affords, but from the physical reality of being bound in chains, imprisoned for the sake of Christ. Yet he commands us, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.” So we must ask, “What is it that inspired Paul to write not only these words, but an entire letter often referred to as the ‘book of joy’ or the ‘book of thanks’?” Furthermore, we must ask, “what is the source of our joy and what are the repercussions of our rejoicing?”

In order to grasp what Paul is saying we should think in terms of two stories: the narrative of Christ and our own story--being united with the Living God. Our thanksgiving, as it was with Paul, must be rooted firmly and solely in Christ. During this Thanksgiving season we must turn our thoughts to his life and his work. We may rightly ponder the mystery of Emmanuel (God with us), and that joyous occasion in which God humbled himself, becoming a man. But we must also remember his task here on earth, his ministry of healing and reconciliation, his suffering, his crucifixion, his death, and his resurrection. In one of the most beautiful passages in Philippians, Paul expresses these sentiments when he describes Christ Jesus as one,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (2:6-11)

We rejoice, then, in Christ’s humility, his sacrificial love, and, simply, in his coming to us. We rejoice, says St. Paul, because, “The Lord is near.”

And thinking of our own lives we must do so in relation to the call we have received from our humble and exalted Lord. Paul encouraged the Philippians, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6). I believe we are to be thankful for matters beyond our physical blessings. More than that we are called to be thankful even in spite of our sufferings, just as Paul was when he penned these words nearly two thousand years ago. This kind of thanksgiving, then, is not rooted in mere material possessions or even in good health, but in *our past*--for God has called us into his service and redeemed us to live in his presence. This kind of thanksgiving is also based in *our present*--in that God is still at work in us this very day, despite our failures and hardships. And, finally, our thanksgiving is rooted in *our future*--the hope and promise that God is still in control and that he will be faithful to us through all of eternity, meeting every possible need.

We are not thankful merely for our life circumstances because fortune or tragedy may befall us in the twinkling of an eye. No, we rejoice for who God is, because in his love he has called us. We rejoice because, "The Lord is near," and because his presence dwells within us and is among us even today. But Paul tells us to respond to God's nearness with prayer, even in times of trouble: "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." So it is our task, in this season of thanksgiving, to go earnestly to God in prayer with grateful hearts, knowing still that God is near and that he is our protection. And in that we have the promise of peace--a peace that surpasses our human understanding. For, indeed, when imprisoned as was Paul or when immersed in suffering it would seem we have no reason to rejoice, but in Christ we do rejoice, for God's presence transcends our sufferings and imprisonments. Therefore his peace is able to transcend them too.

Yet as we close this meditation, I wonder about those outside the church. I wonder wherein lies their thanksgiving and their peace. Is it possible that we perpetuate in them a false hope and a false peace based on our inability to recognize God alone as the giver of both of these gifts and certainly all good things? When those who are not Christians look at us, do they see thankful and peaceful hearts? Do they see persons whose hearts rejoice and bask in the glories of a Holy and Righteous and Loving God, who also loves them?

So as we enter this season of thanksgiving, may we acknowledge God alone as the source of our being, of our peace, and of our grateful hearts. And may his love radiate from us to those who know him not and are unable to truly find joy this Thanksgiving.

"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).

JOHN RICHTER is graduate student in religion at Pepperdine University. The article originally was a thanksgiving meditation given at the annual Thanksgiving Service of Seaver College, Pepperdine University, November, 1998.