

Rejoice Always!

<i>Text</i>	1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
<i>Readings</i>	Psalm 66; Philippians 4:2-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18
<i>Theme and Purpose</i>	It is God's will that in Christ we should always rejoice, often pray and be thankful in everything.

Congregation,

In the course of a normal day people will often ask; "How are you?" Or, "How's your week been?" Or, "How are you getting on?" Usually we answer briefly; "I'm fine. Things are well."

But sometimes you are not fine and all is not well. Maybe your circumstances are especially difficult: You are overloaded at work and under a lot of pressure. At home there is tension between you and your children, or between you as husband and wife. Perhaps you are under pressure to finish off a number of assignments. Perhaps you have been struggling with poor health for a long time and it is getting you down. Maybe you feel lonely and isolated, tired and weary. Things are not all that fine.

Then you hear these positive, up-beat exhortations of the apostle Paul! Rejoice *always*. Pray *continually*. Give thanks *in all circumstances*.

"Come on now," you say! "You must be kidding?! These verses are unrealistic!"

How can I rejoice when my marriage is breaking up, when my children are difficult and rebellious? How can I pray when I feel really down and discouraged? How can I give thanks when my health is bad or when I have just failed an exam.

What is God expecting me to do here!?

God is expecting you and me to be joyful, to be prayerful and to be thankful.

We can do that because of the Lord Jesus; because we know him and belong to him and live close to him. These things are impossible on our own but are possible in and through the Lord Jesus.

This is why the Apostle Paul could write; "Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances." Let's look at each of these.

Be joyful.

The difficulty with this command is that we often do not *feel* very joyful. Instead of feeling 'on top of the world' we feel 'down in the dumps'.

But Christian joy is not a feeling you have inside of you.

Nor is it a superficial gladness. Being joyful doesn't mean that you always have a smile on your face or that you are forever grinning at people.

Nor is joy the same as happiness. Happiness is related to the circumstances of our lives: when things are good, I'm happy; when things are bad, I'm sad. Joy is different from all of these.

Christian joy is based on what we know about the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the Philippians; "Rejoice *in the Lord*." Joy is based on our relationship with Jesus; on knowing his presence with us all the time; on knowing that those who believe in him are forgiven and promised eternal life.

Joy is an attitude we can have because of all God has done for us in and through Jesus.

To know this joy you must know Jesus.

If you know him and trust him you can "be joyful *always*".

Your joy is not dependent on your circumstances; it is dependent on your relationship with Jesus. One commentator writes; "The Christian can never lose his joy because he can never lose Christ".

Christian joy does not deny the reality of trials; rather it calls us to joy even in the midst of suffering or sickness or persecution. You can be joyful and still express sorrow and sadness over things that happen.

This was true for these Christians in Thessalonica. They were facing persecution.

The Apostle Paul himself had experienced trouble in that city. But he knew that they could still rejoice in the Lord. James wrote; "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." (1:2), and the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians that he could be "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." (2 Corinthians 6:10).

This was powerfully illustrated in the life of Guido de Bres, the author of the Belgic Confession. He was a Reformed preacher and pastor in the 16th century but spent much of his life as a minister on the run. Eventually he was captured and thrown into a filthy jail to await trial and certain execution. In a final letter to his wife, Catherine, he wrote about the struggles he had experienced but went on to say;

"I am happy, yes, even joyful, nothing is lacking in the midst of my sorrow. I am filled to overflowing with the riches of God."

He also wrote to his mother, who for many years had prayed that he might be a great preacher of the gospel;

"So then, my beloved mother, as you see me well prepared and joyful, rejoice with me over the honour God gives you, in that he gave you a son who proclaimed His word."

This joyful Christian was executed by hanging on the 31st of May 1567. He was joyful even in trial and persecution.

Can you “rejoice always”? Can you be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing”? Will you look to the Lord Jesus even in the midst of a troubled marriage, or the trials of a divorce, or a chronic illness, or in the death of a loved one, or stresses at work, or troubles in your family? Will you choose to rejoice in the presence of the Lord Jesus with you at all times?

Secondly, **pray without ceasing**.

Prayer is communicating with God; talking to him; expressing our praise and thanksgiving, doubts and trials, sins and failings, requests and needs. Prayer keeps us in contact with God. It is one means of keeping our relationship with him alive and healthy and well.

Joy and prayer are connected together. The way to “be joyful always” is to “pray continually”. If you don’t talk to your wife or your husband you will lose the joy of your marriage relationship.

If you don’t talk to your friends the joy will go out of your friendship.

In the same way if you don’t talk to God you will lose the joy of the Lord. So keep praying and you will keep rejoicing.

Paul tells us to “pray *continually*”. It can also be translated as “pray without ceasing”, or “never give up praying”.

This does not mean ‘non-stop’ prayer. There are times when we need to give our mind to other things: to read that book, play that piano piece, add up those figures, write that letter or listen to that person.

What Paul means is that the lines of communication with God ought always to be open; God should never be far from our thoughts; our daily routines should be full of spontaneous prayer; our lives should be permeated with the presence of God.

You could compare this with having an email connection that is always open – where you are always ‘on-line’. This is what we need in our relationship with God – to be always on-line.

There is a lovely story that illustrates this command to “pray continually”. Several ministers had gathered to discuss difficult questions and it was asked how the command to “pray without ceasing” could be obeyed.

Various suggestions were offered and at last one of the ministers was appointed to write an essay on the subject for the next meeting. A young maidservant, who was serving in the room, heard the discussion and exclaimed: “What! A whole month to tell the meaning of this text? Why, it’s one of the easiest and best verses in the Bible.” “Well, Mary,” said an old minister. “What do you know about it? Can you pray all the time?”

“Oh, yes sir!”

“Tell us then, how do you do it?” said the minister.

“Well, sir,” said the girl, “when I first open my eyes in the morning, I pray: ‘Lord, open the eyes of my understanding;’ and while I am dressing, I pray that I may be clothed with the robe of righteousness.

While I am washing, I ask to have my sins washed away.

As I begin work, I pray that I may receive strength for all the work of the day.

While I kindle the fire, I pray that revival may be kindled in me.

While preparing and eating breakfast, I ask to be fed with the Bread of Life and the pure milk of the Word.

As I sweep the house, I pray that my heart may be swept clean of all its impurities.

As I am busy with the little children, I look up to God and pray that I may always have the trusting love of a little child.

Just as this servant girl, Mary, taught this group of ministers so we need to be taught to pray continually. For many of us this area of prayer is one of our greatest failings. God is often far from our minds. We can go for long periods of time without thinking about him. Our minds idle away in neutral without even considering prayer; or we are distracted by the radio that is always on or the TV flickering away in the corner of the dining room. We need to turn off those distractions and remind ourselves to pray.

To pray continually is to pray *regularly*. Don’t wait for an inspiration. Don’t leave it until you feel close to God. Prayer is a discipline and it must be regular. Pray when you get up in the morning and when you go to bed. Pray before and after you read the Bible. Pray before and after meals. Have set times of prayer. They don’t have to be long but they should be regular. Make a habit of praying at these occasions; even if you don’t pray at any other moment at least you have had these regular times.

But we also need to learn to be *spontaneous* in prayer. Be aware of God. Remember that he is with you – always. Talk to him. Speak with him. You can do this while you are driving to work, cycling to school, vacuuming the house, mowing the lawns, having a coffee. You can interrupt anything you are doing to pray – to ask for help, to confess a sin, to praise God, to express thanks.

Jesus has given us an open door into the presence of God. You can pray to God the Father at any time or moment of the day. “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”. (Hebrews 4:16). “Be joyful always, pray continually”.

Thirdly, **be thankful**: “Give thanks in all circumstances”

These three phrases are connected together. Paul has gone from joy to prayer because you can only “be joyful always” by being regular in prayer.

Now he moves from prayer to thanksgiving because thanksgiving is one of the most vital aspects of prayer. The authors of the catechism connected these two when they wrote that “prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us”.

Notice that we do not thank God *for* everything rather we give thanks “*in*” everything.

You don’t have to thank God when your car breaks down, or when you fail your exams, or when your husband walks out on you, or when a terrorist blows people up in a crowded shopping centre. No, we don’t thank God for those things.

But we do give thanks *in* these circumstances because we know that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). We know that God can and does use this sadness and that tragedy to achieve his purposes in our lives.

Neil Plantinga puts it like this: “So we give thanks for health and in sickness; for happiness and in depression; for family and friends and in those times when it has pleased God to take to himself someone we love.” (Beyond Doubt #21).

In one of her books Joni Eareckson tells how she had to learn to do this after her diving accident as a teenager that left her a quadriplegic. She had been in hospital for some time, brooding on her suffering and savouring her resentment at God. Then one day a friend of hers, who visited her regularly, read her this verse (v 18). He closed his Bible and said; “Joni, it’s about time you got around to giving thanks in that wheelchair of yours.”

She objected and protested; “I don’t feel like giving thanks” and “I don’t understand what God is doing with me.”

They talked some more and eventually she gritted her teeth and, through tears, gave thanks to God. That was the beginning of a life of thanksgiving to God and a life of great usefulness and service to other people, despite her disability.

In the same way we need to give thanks in all circumstances. You must do this because “**this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.**” This phrase looks back over all three of these sayings. It is God’s will that you should be joyful always, that you should be constant in prayer and that you should give thanks to God. This is God’s command; this is what God wants you to do.

This is possible “in Christ Jesus.”

It is not possible in your own strength.

It is not possible by you trying to do it on your own. We are too weak, too weighed down by our old sinful nature.

But it is possible if you believe in the Lord Jesus.

It is possible if you remain in him and he remains in you.

It is possible if you make use of the means of growth God has given to us: Prayer, reading of the Bible, attendance at worship.

All things are possible “through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13).

If you trust that Jesus is always with you then you can “be joyful always”.

If you believe that Jesus died for you and that he is interceding for you at the Father’s right hand then you can “pray continually”.

If you remember all that God had given you in and through Jesus then you can “give thanks in all circumstances.”

Be joyful, be prayerful, and be thankful.

Amen.