

THANKSGIVING 24/7/365?

Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 haunt me. "Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." What haunts me so much is not the joy, prayer, and thanks but the 24/7/365 call to joy, prayer, and thanks. Be joyful **always**. Pray **continually**. Give thanks **in all circumstances**; that threefold command to uninterrupted Spirituality seems nigh unto possible. What planet is Paul from anyway? Maybe there's a chance you or I could return thanks one day a year. But to express thanks, live thanksgiving all year long, why that doesn't seem possible. Let's unpack that text one command at a time, and by the end I intend to show you that Paul hasn't fallen entirely off his rocker. There's a powerful secret in this text to such full-time thanksgiving.

I. REJOICE ALWAYS! The first thing God wants to call you to this thanksgiving is full-time joy. Paul says, be joyful always, or rejoice evermore. Now let me make one thing clear to you from the get go. The pursuit of a joy is a journey, not a destination. Some preachers guilt trip Christians right out of their gourd by saying Christians should never be depressed, or as the famous hymn says, "We should never be discouraged." Christians are already reeling from the pain of normal living and the preacher makes them feel even more shabby than they feel already. Now it's true, a season of sin will torpedo our joy. But just because we feel flat or blue or clinically depressed at any one time or another doesn't mean we've sold our faith for a mess of pottage.

It's important to reckon with the significant difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is based on happenings. This is how Tim Hansel puts it: "The word happiness comes from the same root as the word happening, suggesting that happiness is based on something happening to us. Happiness is circumstantial. If I pay off my car, I'm happy. If I get a new shirt, I'm happy. If my friends say nice things, I'm happy. There is nothing wrong with happiness. It's wonderful. The only problem is that it's based on circumstances, and circumstances have a tendency to shift...Joy, on the other hand, is something that defies circumstances and occurs in spite of difficult situations. Whereas happiness is a feeling, joy is an attitude" [You Gotta Keep Dancing, pp. 53-54]. Later Hansel writes: "I'm still convinced that if you have to move ten inches from where you are now in order to be happy, you never will be" [ibid., pp. 72-73]. It's a temptation to reduce real joy to the thrills, chills, and spills the world calls happiness as we ride the roller coaster of our feelings, up one moment and down the next. True joy is Supranatural. It springs from the Spirit's work in our lives. It's that deep and settled conviction of security, well-being and gladness that though stuff isn't o.k. it's o.k., because God is in charge. I'm reminded of Habakkuk 3:17-18: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet **I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.** The Sovereign Lord is my strength he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights." Catch that? I **will** rejoice! It takes more than happy feelings to make it through life. It takes that inner determination borne of the Spirit to joy in the Sovereign Lord whatever happens.

Consider Paul. His circumstances were predictably lousy. He was no stranger to trouble. He didn't live a cushy sheltered life. He could have showed you scars on his back, from the whips and the rod, showed you deep bruises that had never quite healed where he had been pelted with stones. He wrestled

with a rare eye disease that make it extremely difficult for him to see, perhaps this was the thorn in the flesh he mentions in 2 Corinthians 12. He had known the ache of loneliness, the sting of rejection, the crushing burden of caring for churches that thought he wrote good letters but in person he was a wimp of a preacher. Yet in the same letter of 2 Corinthians he describes his whole career as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." Later on in the same letter to the Corinthians he writes: "In all our troubles, my joy knows no bounds" [2 Corinthians 7:4]. In prison, mind you, his back lacerated through blood to bone, his hands and feet in stocks at midnight, he and his co-worker Silas, lifted up praises and songs of joy to God [Acts 16:25]. And then again in prison in Rome, awaiting sentencing with the possibility that his head would be severed from his body, Paul wrote the most cheerful letter in all the NT, Philippians. And on those pages he wrote: "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say Rejoice!" [Ph 4:4]. Certainly, at times we'll all fail at this. Nevertheless make that the very purpose and pulse beat of your life, to joy in God! He will work it out! He will turn your mourning into dancing. He will bring you through the fog of doubt into the sunshine of a certain faith. Rejoice always! The 2nd command also appears impossible.

II. PRAY CONTINUALLY! What could Paul mean by this? Some think that Paul is calling on the saints of Thessalonika to adopt a **spirit of prayer** in the fabric of their whole life—to maintain uninterrupted fellowship with God whether sleeping, playing a trumpet, or eating a hamburger. Others see Paul's word here as a prescription for **arrow prayers**, whenever a need grabs you immediately move in your heart to breathe a prayer. The Greek word, *adialeptos*, often translated, without ceasing, is used on the context of a nagging cough, whenever you feel the tickle, the tug of the Spirit to pray, pray.

Though Paul certainly wanted us to cultivate a spirit of prayer, and release arrow prayers at the Spirit's prompting, I sense as I've struggled with this command, that what he was aiming at was **persistence in our prayers**. This sense fits best with the stuff going on at Thessalonika. They were discouraged, downhearted, in the midst of persecution. We read in 2:14 "You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews." When you're hammered on; when you face stiff opposition; when you bury loved ones; it's tough to pray and it's a temptation to quit. Your life is coming unraveled, your marriage in shambles, your soul shredded. Don't stop praying. Don't give up. Pray on without ceasing. Wrestle with the Lord, like Jacob and cry: "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" [Gn 32:26]. We come that to that final incredible word.

III. GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES. Note that the text says, "Give thanks **in** all circumstances, not **for** all circumstances." Merlin Corothers wrote a book awhile back suggesting we should praise the Lord for all things. Praise the Lord, my brother is in a cult; my sister's marriage is busted up. That's flippant silliness. Don't thank God for anything that may spring from the work of the enemy. So here's the challenge: To thank God **in** all circumstances.

Alan Loy McGinnis tells of a friend who drove up to a gas station in Arizona during a violent rainstorm. It was shortly after the Vietnam War. McGinnis writes: "The attendant came out, whistling happily as he filled the gasoline tank. As my friend paid for the gas, he apologized for bringing the attendant out in such a downpour. 'That's all right,' the attendant answered, his

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clothes dripping water into a puddle. 'When I was lying in a foxhole in Vietnam, I vowed that if I got home alive, I'd be so grateful I wouldn't complain about anything again, and I haven't' [The Power of Optimism, p. 71]. This Vietnam Vet had embraced the gratitude attitude. He had learned what Paul means when he says, "Give thanks in all circumstances." It was raining cats and dogs outside. But inside, in his heart, the weather was high and dry. He was carrying the weather within him.

Inside each one of us is a jute box. Press the wrong button and we keep on playing the same old song. We awfulize reality. We catastrophize. We map out the worst case scenarios. We grumble about MN weather, nit-pick our spouse, find fault with our teacher, grouse about our work schedule. So quit hitting the same button on the jute box! Pick a new song, a song of thanks to our God. You can choose joy. You can choose to be grateful. O.K. sometimes your thanksgiving has the quality of the Old Toyota commercial. You're three feet off the ground leaping and singing: Oh, Oh, Oh, what a feeling! Other times the thanks is much more subdued and anguished even. But all the time, especially when you find yourself in a grumpy mood, just start thanking the Lord; for anything and everything. Try doing this while you're driving. Pray with your eyes open. Thanking God for your warm car; for the bracing cold; for the MN highway system, for an incredible sunset. For a healthy breakfast, a hot cup of coffee, for the adventure of work, colleagues, friends. Even thank God in the midst of the tough stuff you're processing. God is shaping your mental toughness, your relational wisdom, your deep faith and perseverance.

Be joyful always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. Now here's the secret to it all. *"For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* You say you can't be joyful? Can't give thanks this thanksgiving? I have good news for you. What you can't do, Jesus can do in and through you. The "can do" gratitude attitude, supernatural joy in the midst of adversity is His miraculous work. It is this dynamic partnership, union with the risen Christ. It's Jesus who unceasingly breathes His Spirit in your heart to move you toward joy, to pinch you to pray and keep you persistent at it, and to give thanks even when life is red and tooth and claw. You may be at the end of your rope, but you have something to hang on to when there's nothing else to hang on to. You have Jesus Christ! And He is enough. *"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"*
