

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Paul and his fellow missionaries had been driven out of Thessalonica by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul has not been able to return to Thessalonica, so he sends Timothy, one of his fellow missionaries, who brings back a report about how the Thessalonians are doing and what issues they are facing. In response to Timothy's report, Paul sends this letter. Last week, we looked at the vision Paul gave them regarding their horizontal relationships with others in the church. This week and next, we will look at what he tells them about their vertical relationship with God. I want to focus on three verses this morning:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 - Rejoice always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

This passage may be short, but the exhortations in this passage are truly what you need, more than you even know, at the core of your being. **You need a joy and a peace that can survive the ups and downs of your life and can weather the hardest storms and worst enemies of life.** Clearly Paul is communicating that no matter the circumstances, we ought to be rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. In the good times and the bad. In sickness and in health, whether wealthy or in poverty. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. This is what your loving and good Father desires for you.

Now, the NIV used to translate this as "Be joyful always," which I think was a really unhelpful way of phrasing this. After all, how do you honestly tell someone to be joyful always? Am I supposed to instinctively feel joyful when a loved one dies, or I find out I have cancer, or my spouse divorces me? After all, even Paul told us in Romans 12:15 to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn, and Jesus himself was called a man of sorrows. We do not always feel joy, nor should we, especially in tragic circumstances. But we can CHOOSE to rejoice. We can CHOOSE to pray. And we can CHOOSE to give thanks. More specifically, we can choose to rejoice in the Lord, even when we don't find joy in our circumstances. And we can give Him thanks in every circumstance, even we are not thankful for our circumstance. Paul notes this apparent contradiction in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 6:4,10 - *Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: sorrowful, yet always rejoicing*

How can you be someone who might be sorrowful because of the suffering of life, and yet still be always rejoicing? I believe this short text will help us. Let me share two things from this passage that your soul needs to hear today:

- 1) Rejoice in and give Him thanks for who He is, what He has done, and what He has promised.

Remember how Paul put it in another of his letters:

Philippians 4:4 - *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

It is so important that we learn what this means, because life is really hard. It is hard to escape the reality that as belief in God has gone down, **the rates of depression and anxiety have skyrocketed, as have deaths of despair** – deaths due to suicide, drug abuse, and liver disease. Even life expectancy is falling. One of the main reasons is that when you remove God from the equation, you need to look to the things and people of this earth to fulfill you, to give your life joy and meaning. And this world can be a terrible, heart-breaking, anxiety-provoking place. Nothing in this world can truly satisfy the deepest longings of our heart. And even when you do find something that will satisfy, it doesn't last. As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it:

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 - *I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. ¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.*

But it's not just the Bible, but science that argues this as well. As Tim Keller wrote in *Making Sense of God*:

“On January 7th, 2007, the New York Times Magazine ran an interesting article called ‘Happiness 101.’ It described positive psychology, a branch of psychology that seeks to take a scientific, empirical approach to what makes people happy. Researchers in this field have found that if you focus on doing things and getting things that give you pleasure, it does not lead to happiness but produces what one researcher has dubbed ‘the hedonic treadmill.’ You become addicted to pleasure,

and your need for the pleasure fix keeps growing: You have to do more and more. You're never really satisfied, never really happy.

If anyone has ever chased the high of an addiction, you know this to be true. Pursuing happiness in the things of this world is a sure way to make yourself miserable in the long run. As long as we are locating our joy and peace in this world, we are at the mercy of our circumstances. After all, even the best marriages end, the best jobs do not last, the best vacations stop. There is a better way, and it is find your joy in the Lord.

As C.S. Lewis put it: *“Most people, if they have really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, **can really satisfy**. I am not speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we have grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job, **but something has evaded us**... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthy pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthy pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”*

There is a greater joy that all of the fleeting pleasures and joys of this world point to. The solution is to recognize that the pleasures of this world will not fully satisfy what your heart is longing for. Only God will satisfy you, so pursue Him with your whole heart. As St. Augustine put it, *“You have made us for yourself, and **our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.**”*

This is why it is critical for you to rejoice IN THE LORD and to give thanks TO THE LORD in all circumstances, and not to tie your joy and peace and gratitude to anything or anyone in this world. Then, even when hard times come, they will not steal your joy, for it is found in the Lord. As Tim Keller put it, *“If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of*

your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy.”

Rejoice in who God is, what He has done, and what He has promised to do. Present, past and future. Let me give you some examples:

His character

Thank you that you love me – **John 3:16** - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Thank you that you are all-powerful – **Mark 10:27** - *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."*

Thank you that you are full of grace and mercy – **Psalms 103:8** - *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*

Thank you that you are good and faithful – **Psalms 100:5** - *For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.*

Thank you that you are just and righteous – **Deuteronomy 32:4** - *He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.*

Thank you that you never change – **Numbers 23:19** - *God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*

You are sovereign over everything. You are trustworthy. You know the end from the beginning

What He has done

Thank you that you died for my sins – **Isaiah 53:4-5** - *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

You ransomed me from the devil – Mark 10:45 - *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

You forgave me and reconciled me to God – 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 - *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

You adopted me as your beloved child – John 1:12-13 - *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

You have promised me an inheritance in Christ – 1 Peter 1:3-4 - *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you,*

You gave me your Holy Spirit – Romans 5:5 - *And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

You conquered sin and death - John 11:25-26 - *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

His promises

Thank you that you are always working all things for good
Romans 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

You will use this for my good, to make me more like Jesus or equip me to minister to or empathize with others in a way that I could not otherwise.

You promised to come again to take me to be with you - John 14:2-3 - *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am*

going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

You promised to never leave me nor forsake me - Hebrews 13:5 - Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

You have promised instant access to you when I am in need - Hebrews 4:16 - Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

You promised to supply all my needs - Philippians 4:19 - And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

You promised to give me wisdom when I need it - James 1:5 - If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

The deeper your joy, the more untouchable it is. So rejoice in the Lord! In the midst of circumstances that make you want to cry, that make you want to die, when you are experiencing the worst worldly sorrows, when you are in prison or poverty or loneliness or exhaustion, turn your eyes to the Lord and find your joy in Him, remembering who He is, what He has done, and what He has promised.

This takes work – when you see yourself being controlled by your circumstances, you can stop to rejoice in the Lord. Remember the Psalmist in Psalm 42:

Psalm 42:5-6 - Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and ⁶ my God.

This does not come naturally. It comes by finding your joy in the Lord. Recounting the reasons you have to praise Him. As Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote in his book *Spiritual Depression*:

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc.

Somebody is talking. Who is talking? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.' ...

*The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down' – what business have you **to be disquieted?***

*You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God' – instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has **pledged Himself to do.***

Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God.'"

Rejoice in and give thanks for who God is, what He has done, and what He has promised.

2) **Pray – and stay connected to God – continually**

We are to live connected to God like branches to a vine.

John 15:4-5 - *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

When we are connected to Him like branches to a vine, we make ourselves available to Him. We are filled with His Spirit and His strength, and we are in line with His will. Praying continually includes intercessory prayer, praying for others. But praying continually **doesn't mean just praying for others. It means being with the Lord, so that our lives and service flow out of our devotion to Him and our intimacy with Him.** It is talking to the Lord, reminding yourself of who He is, what

He has done, and what He has promised. The daily office is a great way to do this. Practicing the presence of God by Brother Lawrence. Spiritual mindfulness.

Seek God. Seek intimacy with God. The more you know Him, the more you will love Him. And the more you will know who He is, what He has done, and what He has promised, so that you might rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances.

John 10:10 - *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

If you don't know this, ask him for it.

John 16:24 - *Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*

Ask God to reveal to you His beauty, His greatness, His love, that you might desire Him: to know Him, to love Him, to follow Him.