

Have you ever watched the end of a game? A football game, a tennis match, whatever it is and notice the way that the 2 opposite teams or 2 people walk off the field. The difference between what it looks like to be a winner and a loser. When you watch the team walk off excited, you don't have to wonder what team won. You can see it.

You couldn't even watch the game. You could just watch them walk off the field and know, well, they lost and they won and I've got a picture here of their body language. When you look at the 2 guys on each end, you're like, Oh, we obviously won. They're all like, Whoo and yeah. The other guy's like, Oh, man.

You know, thinking of all the things you should have done differently, all the ways you could have done something different. There is a world of difference between walking off after a win and walking around after a loss. And I want to tell you my heart breaks every time I see a Christian walking around in defeat with their head down, feeling like they've lost and it is all around us. Our nation is full of people who are discouraged. Discouragement dims our happiness.

It paralyzes our motivation. When discouragement hits, we feel less energy, our feet drag. It makes our burdens seem heavier. It makes our hard times harder and it makes our worship mechanical. We just go through the motions.

Everybody deals with it sometimes, but Christians don't have to stay that way, but far too many people do. Every week, I read about a pastor who gave up, a marriage that is struggling, all around us we see homes filled with people who are filled with stress and depression. They are discouraged. Their heads are filled with worry. Their hearts are filled with anxiety and discouraged Christians are walking around with heads down, feet shuffling, feeling overwhelmed and alone.

But this morning God is calling us to walk in victory and I believe we can. Would you turn to Ephesians chapter 5 and stand with me for the reading of the word. Ephesians chapter 5 will begin in verse 15. So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise.

Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do. Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead be filled with the spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves and making music to the Lord in your hearts and give thanks for everything to God the father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray together.

Father, we come to you in the middle of a stress filled world, in the middle of an anxious country and father we come to you as your people asking you to speak to us through your spirit this morning. Let your word come alive in our hearts, and Father, give us the understanding that we need to apply it to our lives. In Jesus' name, amen. Thank you. Please be seated.

Now Paul understood the reason why so many people feel defeated. He knew why so many Christians have their heads down. They had their heads down in his day too. People were walking around feeling defeated, but Paul's head wasn't down. Before you say, sure, that's fine.

You know, Paul was a preacher and you preachers have it all easy. You know, you don't ever have to worry about anything. Paul didn't ever have to walk a mile in my shoes or he wouldn't be saying all this stuff. Well, Paul wasn't writing these words from a pastor's office. He wasn't writing these words from a comfy villa on the Mediterranean coast.

He was writing these words from a Roman prison. 2nd Corinthians 11 tells us that Paul had gone through some horrific struggles. He'd been placed in prison many times. He'd been whipped. He said, more times than I can remember.

He faced death over and over. The 39 lashes from the Romans that were given was because 40 lashes would probably kill someone, so they stopped at 39. He'd received 39 lashes 5 different times. He'd been beaten with rods 3 times. He'd been stoned.

He'd been shipwrecked three times; he was in constant danger, hunted, cold, sleepless and hungry. The man writing these words to us went through all those things, but here he talks about singing and worshiping and making music in our arts and giving thanks to God for everything. How did he get that kind of attitude after going through what he went through and how can we get that kind of attitude? We're gonna walk through these verses and follow his path. 1st in verse 15, he said, be careful how you live.

Now I don't know how careful you all are. I am not usually very careful. We had a big huge swing set when our kids were a little smaller when we moved, and it was one of those big wooden swing sets with these 16 foot 6 by 4 beam that went across. And when we were moving for some reason we had to strap that thing to the top of our car and, and so I had it tied down really good and we had everything and we're rushing to get in the car and I don't know what I forgot or why I was doing it, but I ran around the back of the car really quick and I met that pole about right here and the pole didn't go anywhere, but I did. It about knocked me out.

I was not paying attention and that's the word that was used. The Greek word carries the idea of precision and accuracy. He said, be careful how you live. Be intentional. Look where you are going and I have seen Christians walking through days, weeks, months and sometimes years, feeling discouraged and defeated, not really paying attention to where they're going.

Too many of us are missing the joy that God intends for us to have and we're missing the opportunities that he talks about to live for Christ and for other people. When I was a kid, I don't know how many of you have ever floated on a raft in the ocean. Anybody ever done that? In Galveston, we would go down to the ocean every once in a while and we'd get on a raft and my grandparents took us 1 year. My parents were busy and so my grandpa was just like, he got his little chair and he got his little umbrella and he never looked up until it was time to go home.

We could literally do anything we wanted. And so I'm out there, I got on a raft and I'm just floating and I'm watching the waves and I'm kicking and and I'm not I hadn't seen jaws yet, so everything was good and and and I looked up for a minute and I turned around and I could barely see the shore from where I was. The tide was going out and so was David and and I couldn't not only could I barely see the shore, but I couldn't see where I was because it had taken me down and taken me about a mile, about a half a mile out and about a mile down the coast. Only a foolish person floats with the tide. Yes, I know what I just did.

I called myself a little foolish, but so many of us float along in our life and we're not paying attention to where we're going. We're just letting life carry us along and Paul said, no, because you're gonna turn around one day. You're gonna wonder how to get back and he said, be careful where you're going. Pay attention. Look how you're living and what you're doing.

In verse 16, the word for opportunity, he said, be careful to take every opportunity. It comes from a Latin word meaning toward the port and that would have applied to me. I needed to be careful to head towards safety and instead I was drifting out to sea. We need to be careful to take our course toward safety and to help others do the same thing. When we start to feel discouraged, when we start to feel down, when we start to feel that that anxiety creep in, that is the moment when we turn around and realize that we've gotten a little too far away from the father, we've gotten a little too far out to see and we need to turn around and head back to safety.

God is reminding us we have a very short time to take the most out of every opportunity in these evil days. Now he called them evil days then. I can't even imagine what God would say about what's going on right now. Can you imagine all the things that were going on in his day? He knew persecution was about to fall.

He was writing from prison, so he understood evil days. It's hard right now in our country, to watch what used to be a godly country heading in the wrong direction. It is full of evil and it's not just tolerated. It's celebrated. It's rated.

It's celebrated. It's protected. It's encouraging and I think most people around us right now, most of us sitting in this room feel 2024 is gonna be a very interesting year. It's an election year. Right?

We talked about that in Sunday school and it's gonna be quite the ride. Sometimes it's difficult to believe we live in a tree that has become so dysfunctional and full of evil. And as I learned last month, we don't know how long we have. None of us knows how long our time is. And he says, in this place of evil, in this place you live, in the place that the Ephesians lived in the place where us Americans live.

He said, you're living in some evil times, but take advantage of the opportunity that God has given you. Because we don't know how long we have, but we also don't know how long other people have, the lost people around us. We have no long idea how long our window of opportunity unity will be when we meet somebody. We need to take advantage of every

opportunity God gives us with every person he gives us, whether they're in our home, whether they meet them in line or as I met somebody in traffic as I was driving and my first instinct was, oh, you are not going 20 miles an hour. Think was, oh, you are not going 20 miles an hour.

And I went immediately, because I've been, you know, doing the sermon all week. I like, oh, this is an opportunity, Lord. God, would you just bless that woman? Would you help her get where she's going safely? Obviously, she is stressed and so instead of being frustrated for 20 or 30 seconds, I got to pray for her for 20 or 30 seconds.

If you're here today, I'm glad I had that reaction instead of honking and driving around you, in verse 17, we're told to not act thoughtlessly. What does it mean to act thoughtlessly? It means a quick reaction. It means a reaction from humanity instead of from the Lord. Now to many people he says he says, do what the Lord wants you to do.

Be in the will of God. A lot of people will say, boy, if I just knew God's will, I'd do it. If I just knew what it was, but that will of God thing, that is just that's something that's something just mystical and and only a few people ever find the will of God. That's not true. God makes it really easy.

Listen to this in Romans 12:2. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. God says this, you can discover his will as you allow your mind to be transformed by his word. As you leave the world and you let God start working in you, he gives you the understanding that you need to know his will. You can know the will of God and are commanded to know the will of God.

We discover that as he transforms us through the word, through prayer, through meditation, through worship. He changes each one of us. I want to tell you something. You cannot skip the reading of the word. You cannot skip prayer and expect God to bless you and show you His will because you've removed the method God uses to do that.

You must be in the word, you must be in prayer because you need and I need a renewed mind. God gave us a mind, he expects us to use it. For those of you who weren't given a mind, you are excused. God saved us. He has a purpose for our lives and we need to discover that purpose.

You have no greater purpose on earth than the purpose God has given you and he reveals that through his word, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, sometimes through our circumstances. But I want you to hear this. Every Christian can walk in victory because accomplishing the will of the father is a win. It doesn't matter if it ends you up in jail as it did, Paul, or if it ends you up in a pulpit or in a pew, when you do the will of God, you have won. But when we are not walking in victory, when we are when we are living with discouragement, something else happens and Paul's about to address that because when you get depressed, when you get anxious, when you get worried, something happens inside of us and we need relief.

We want something to distract us, something to happen and and and we look for something to either take away our feelings and our emotions or to add better feelings and emotions and we usually turn to the wrong things. Paul is beginning to address that in verse 18 do not be drunk with wine. Now, the tradition in those days was to take wine and add 3 to 4 parts of water to the wine. That was the way they drank their wine. The people, theologians in the day, the historians in the day would say, well, if somebody only mixes this wine with one part water, they're wanting to get drunk.

And in the Bible, when it talks about a drunk being excited about the deep red color of the wine, it's because he hadn't diluted it. And so, for us, he was talking about strong drink when you talk about this straight wine. And he says, do not be drunk with wine. Why? Well, he tells us. He said, it will ruin your life.

When you start getting drunk, when you take that alcohol or whatever substance it is that comes in it will begin to control you. According to the National Institute For Health, alcohol consumption increased more during COVID-19 than it had in 50 years before that. That means there were a whole lot more people who were searching for a distraction or for relief and they're not getting it from the Lord. They're looking in the wrong place.

They're anxious. They're worried. They're alone and so they're looking for something to dull the pain, to remove the worry even if it's just for a little while. That's a toxic combination that Satan loves. Alcohol may provide a momentary escape, but so does closing your eyes in traffic. It is a very temporary solution to a problem and it usually results in a whole lot more problems after you open your eyes.

Alcohol takes control, we lose control. Drugs take control, we lose control, pornography takes control, we lose control. Whatever it is that we start turning to that's not the Holy Spirit is the wrong control. I know a lot of you like me lived with that when you were growing up. When we went to a family function, it didn't matter which side of the family we were on, everybody was drinking and usually they started before we got there.

I could always tell about how long the party or the event or the holiday was gonna last. I could tell by the sound level that was coming around and the laughter and then the arguments and then the fights and over and over watching the adults in my life who were supposed to be in control making fools of themselves. And me and my little brother and the other kids in the family were watching the devastation it caused. Many of you have been there. You understand that even though they thought they were having a good time, it only lasted for a few hours and left behind a wreck.

Paul said instead of turning to something else that controls you like alcohol or drugs or whatever it is, he said be filled with the Holy Spirit instead. Be filled with something that's gonna bless you, that loves you, that wants to hold you and keep you safe. This is God's command to all of us and he expects us to obey. He said be filled and it's not ourselves. It's permitting the Holy Spirit to fill us and it's not a one time event.

It is a constant. It is to be controlled by, to be filled by. Luke 4:28 says the religious leaders were filled with wrath at Jesus. They were controlled by wrath, because then it made them wanna kill Jesus. To be controlled or filled with the spirit means to be controlled by the spirit and so you and I are to be under the control of the Holy Spirit.

When a person trusts Jesus as their savior, you receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit in that moment. The Holy Spirit comes into your life, and he is with you until we get to heaven. It is the ceiling, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We receive that whenever we become a Christian we put our faith in Jesus. But the filling of the spirit, the baptism of the spirit shows I belong to Christ's body, but the filling of the spirit shows that my body belongs to Christ.

It shows that I'm under his control. That means I stop allowing the world to fill my heart and my mind. It means I stop allowing the news to dictate my attitude and my actions. That means I stop allowing the world, the politicians to speak into my peace and my joy that it comes from the Lord. I fill my mind and my heart with the Word of God, with the truth of God, with what he says and I submit to that truth.

I line myself up with his will and then I am filled with the Holy Spirit, which means I am controlled by the Holy Spirit. He is guiding and leading me. And the result of that is that something else happens. Because when you and I are filled with the Word of God in prayer, we are seeking the Lord opening ourselves up allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us, something incredible happens. You and I find the joy that God has waiting for us all along. When I truly believe God, when I'm in line with his will, when my mind is in the right place, all the politicians in Washington, DC couldn't do enough silly things to steal my joy.

When my mind is lined up with the Lord, the truth is, I know God is in control and I know my God is gonna accomplish his will no matter if every army that ever marched the face of the earth said they're coming against him, if my heart is set on the Lord, I have no worries because my God is in control. There is nothing coming in 2024 that our God cannot handle. When I'm believing God and following his will, there's nothing that can steal the song from my heart. There's nothing that can steal the worship from my lips, because I am controlled by the Lord.

There's no circumstance outside of his control. There is no situation. He's not able to carry me through. Last month when I got that kidney stone and I didn't didn't know I had the kidney stone and so it finally caused me enough pain to shut me down. And when it shut me down, it shut me down sometimes to the point that I couldn't speak.

I couldn't move. It was like somebody had a taser on me and in those moments, I couldn't talk, but I could still talk inside my head. You know what I'm talking about? You could still think and so I would talk to the Lord. I was sitting there.

I didn't even remember my doctor until the 3rd visit. I didn't know what he looked like because my eyes were usually shut or I was just gone, But I could talk to the Lord. I told him I trusted

him. I told him he would either heal me now and I would praise him now or I would see him in a little while and I would praise him then. But it didn't steal the song from my heart. It stole the breath from my lips.

It stole my control of my body, but it didn't take what was inside. We can have joy no matter what our circumstances are. You and I can still have joy. We're told in verse 19 to do this. The result of the Holy Spirit being in charge.

He said, sing Psalms. Now the Psalms were the inspired word of God put to music and so we have these songs and the Psalms. Then he said, sing hymns, which were in songs that were written by men to glorify God and then he said spiritual songs together. In other words, just songs about the Lord magnified Jesus Christ. Even in Ephesians, he are they already had blended worship.

Paul's already already making sure there's no arguments about what type of worship was going on. When we're filled, the church is built. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, worship is full and our hearts are full. We worship not from our preferences, we worship because he is worthy. At the end of verse 19, he says, make music to the Lord in your heart.

Psalm 42:8 says this, the Lord will command his lovingkindness in the daytime and in the night his song shall be with me. A prayer to the God of my life. Even in the dark of a long night, even if physical pain steals the breath from your lungs, even if emotional pain paralyzes you, even if circumstances you find yourself in have wrapped themselves around you and you cannot even think. He is still with us. He is still there in those moments and we can still make music in our hearts, even if our lips won't respond, and then God speaks something that has probably stunned every generation that has read it since it was written.

He says in verse 20, give thanks for everything to God the father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. He said, remember whose you are, be careful to make the most of every opportunity, don't be drunk with wine, be filled with the spirit, sing even if it's just in your heart and give thanks to God for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. How many of you had a grandmother who grew up in the Depression? My grandmother grew up in the Depression. You did not waste food in my grandmother's home.

And we were going to praise the Lord and thank him for every meal that she made. And so we would bow our heads and you ate what was on your plate. There wasn't any honey. What would you like to eat? I know we're having this, but no, you're having that.

And that's what everybody was having. We gave thanks for those meals no matter what it was. I will tell you I was a whole lot more thankful for, you know, fried chicken than I was for, like brussels sprouts, I could have been super thankful for cake, but thankful for everything? Thankful for everything see that's where we stop, isn't it? I found through counseling many couples going through marital problems that usually there's a time when we stop taking our time to appreciate the other person, we start taking them for granted.

Many of the problems we face as Christians is because we've started taking God for granted. We started. We stopped living for ourselves. We stopped living in love with God, and we start living for what God's doing for us in the moment. We start trying to do things in our own strength.

We start trying to make our own way and we ask God to come along with us. We walk away from victory and when we do we start hanging our heads and we start shuffling our feet because we're walking in defeat. We're walking away from the source of victory. We are told to be thankful for everything. Now to be honest with you, even people on their way to hell are thankful for something sometimes.

Even lost people, the worst person on the planet, the most evil person on the planet is thankful for what they love. We're told to be thankful for everything, and that's a big difference. How do we see life that way? Only if you're submitted and trusting it to Jesus Christ, if you are submitted to him, if you're filled with the spirit, then you look at life differently and what does that look like? It means you and I look at life like God tells us to in his word.

And what does he tell us? He said, your life is like a vapor. Now this week, we've had some cold temperatures, so we all had the experience of seeing our breath and that's what he was talking about. Your life is like this and then you're in eternity. As long as that white little vapor lasts, is how long our life is.

The worst life, the best life, they're gonna go by so quickly and we are with him. When we base our eternity on our immediate circumstances, it is like basing our life on that brief moment how we feel when we breathe out and we see the vapor. He said compare your life to eternity. Put it in my hands to know that you are offered forever. When we think of the eternal rewards God has planned for us, when we think of the eternal life he's purchased for us, when we think of living forever as adopted sons and daughters of God then we can thank God for everything now because that is coming soon.

1 Corinthians 2:9 says, but as it is written, eye has not seen nor ear heard nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love him. If you love surprises, you've got one coming. It is gonna be so incredible, we can't wrap our minds around it. The creator is pulling out all the stops to show you his love. Jesus gave his life to make it possible for you to experience that.

How in the world could you and I allow this brief moment in time to keep our lips from saying thank you to God. Satan loves to hear people complain. God loves to hear his children give thanks worship from their hearts. Remember Paul was in prison when he wrote these words, but he knew that prison was only temporary. He knew those guards that were chained to him were there because God put them there and so they had to keep changing guards because Paul kept leading them to Jesus and they kept changing his guards out.



To be thankful for everything means that we recognize that our God is in charge. We're submitted to him. Therefore, we're walking in his will and when we're walking in his will then everything he allows is worth thanking him for. This brief time is our opportunity to live for the king and it is short. So here's a few things to take away.

Number 1, be wise. Be wise. Walk carefully with your God. Pursue him. Love him.

Get in the word. Be in prayer. Be wise. And number 2 is be filled. Be filled.

Stop putting off your time with the Lord. Stop prioritizing other things that are going to cause you stress. Stop allowing something else to take the place of God in your life. It's God's path for you out of the discouragement. His word is a path for you out of despair, out of defeat and into joy and victory.

Get rid of sin, get into the word, get into prayer and allow the Holy Spirit to lead you into victory every single day. Number 3 is be thankful. I'm gonna ask you some questions and I'm gonna ask you to lift your head Christian, has your God loved you? Some of you know that God loves has your God loved you? Yes.

Did Jesus give himself on the cross for you? Yes. Are your sins washed away by the blood of the lamb? Yes. Did our savior conquer death and rise again?

Did he promise to never leave you or forsake you? Yes. Is he coming back for you? Aren't you glad? Sing, worship, rejoice.

Whatever your current circumstance or whatever is happening in the moment, be thankful. Worship out loud. Worship in your heart and thank God for everything. During a very long hard night, Jacob, whose name means deceiver, met God and he wrestled with God that night. He had spent his whole life running away, but now he wrestled with God and Jacob became famous that night, because as he wrestled with God, he held on until God finally dislocated his hip, caused him great pain.

I don't know if you've ever dislocated a joint, but dislocation of a hip in that day was severe and he dealt with a limp and pain the rest of his life. God renamed him and he called him Israel. One whom God has helped. How did God help him? God helped him by wrestling with him and dislocating his hip.

Sometimes the help we receive from God doesn't look like what we want it to, but God knows best. God knows what we need. For all of eternity, I can promise you this. Jacob, Israel will praise God for that dislocated hip. What hard trials can you thank God for now?

I'm not saying you thanked God for him in the moment, but what can you look back going, oh man, I went through that and that changed me. I'm different because I went through that trial. I'm different because I went through that hard time. I am changed. I've learned more about God.

I've learned more about self. God used that in my life. Now if we take what we've learned and we apply that to right now, can we thank God now for what we know will happen then? Everything God allows, one day he will turn to a blessing for you and I. He promises that all things, all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his that's all things.

Remember, our God gives us songs even in the darkest night. Even when our lips cannot speak. When Paul and Silas were in prison, they'd been beaten, they were bloodied, they were in chains, they're in the bottom of this prison and they are thanking God and worshipping God right there in prison. God saved the jailer and his entire family. Whatever your circumstances, give thanks.

Believe God has a reason and a purpose even if you can't see it in the moment. Make it a rule in your life to thank God for everything, even if you don't see it right now. Thank you Lord for this. Thank you God for what you're allowing and when you do it can turn a jail into a worship center. It can turn the worst circumstances into a blessing, if you will thank the Lord.

If you want more joy from the Lord, it begins with Jesus. Some of you here need to get to know him. Some of you have been hearing about him. You've got a religion. You like the idea, but you need to put your trust in your faith in Jesus because that's the first step to this road of joy.

You need to trust in him, confess your sin and follow and you will find life. Can I ask you to bow your heads and close your eyes for just a moment? If you need Jesus, if you've known about him, maybe you've heard about him for the first time, the Son of God who came to live, he died on the cross for your sins and he rose again. The Bible says when you believe in him, put your trust in Him and turn from your sin. You have forgiveness and eternal life and if that is you this morning, could I ask you to submit to him, to turn your life over to him, to turn away from your sin and pray with me right now to put your faith and trust in him.

If that is you, would you pray with me? Dear God, thank you for loving me. I know I've done wrong, but I believe Jesus paid my price on the cross. Would you please forgive me? I wanna turn from my sin and I wanna live every day of my life for you until the day I stand before you face to face.

If that is you, heads bowed and eyes closed, if you prayed that prayer with me this morning and you put your trust and faith in Jesus, would you just look up at me and catch my eye just for a minute? Awesome. Awesome. Awesome. For those of you in this room, if discouragement has been stealing the joy from your days, if anxious thoughts have been making your nights a little darker, Slowing your steps.

If you've been walking around feeling discouraged like you're losing, maybe it's time to just bring it to the Lord. Just to submit yourself to Him and to stand before Him as His child. So I'm just gonna ask you, if you've been dealing with discouragement, if loss, if anxiety, if stress has been

getting you, would you just, heads bowed and eyes closed. Would you just stand right where you are? Just say, Lord that's me.

If you're tired of living that way, would you just stand right now? Father, for those who are standing, I pray that you would fill them with your word. Fill them with confident assurance, not in their own ability, not in their health, father not in their finances, not in their relationships with the people around them. I pray they would find their stability and their ability in you. You would wash over them, that your love would fill them.

They would feel your hands and your arms wrapped tightly around them. You would hold them close. And Lord, I pray you would keep their minds from being spoken to by the enemy, that father you'd fill their hearts and minds with your promises and with your truth in Jesus' name. Amen.