

# General Issues, Part 2

## 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

### Introduction

Paul has begun wrapping up his brief letter to the Thessalonians and now directs his thoughts to the spiritual qualities that must characterize Christians. He has just addressed Christian responsibilities to each other (5:12-15) and will now address the Christian's spiritual duties (5:16-18) as well as the work of the Holy Spirit (5:19-22). Then, he will pen his final farewell and benediction (5:23-28).

### 5:16-18: Characteristics of the Christian Life

#### 5:16 - Joy

To "rejoice always" (v. 16) highlights an essential aspect of Christian life: the persistent joy we can experience despite severe challenges. From the outset, Paul praised the Thessalonians for their joyful response to persecution, a joy imparted by the Holy Spirit and shared with others, making them a source of joy. This sentiment is seen when Paul expresses immense gratitude for the joy the Thessalonians bring him in God's presence.

The New Testament frequently links joy with life's trials, suggesting that true joy arises not from earthly circumstances but from a deep reliance on the Lord, especially during hardships. The Thessalonians primarily illustrated this perspective, who embodied continual joy as they depended entirely on God to work through their difficulties for their ultimate good. Thus, the call to "rejoice always" is not about ignoring life's pains but embracing a joyful dependence on God throughout life's trials.

#### Things to Rejoice About<sup>24</sup>

**Appreciation of God's Character:** We should always rejoice in recognition of God's faithful demonstration of His righteous character, even during hardships, as celebrated by the psalmist (Psalm 28:7).

**Christ's Work of Redemption:** Constant joy stems from gratitude towards Christ's salvation, which reflects the grace, love, mercy, and compassion of God (Luke 2:10; Romans 5:1-2).

**Ministry of the Holy Spirit:** Joy is also found in the Holy Spirit's ongoing work in believers' lives (Acts 10:44; Romans 14:17).

**Spiritual Blessings:** There is cause for rejoicing in the multitude of spiritual blessings believers receive, including strength and provision from God (Ephesians 1:3-4; Philippians 4:13).

**God's Providence:** Joy arises from the belief in God's providence, orchestrating all things for the good of His people (Romans 8:28-30; James 1:2-4).

**The promise of Future Glory:** The assured future glory brings deep joy to us, as seen throughout Scripture (Matthew 5:12; Philippians 1:18-21).

**Answered Prayer:** Answered prayers are a significant source of joy (Psalms 66:20; John 16:24).

**God's Word:** Appreciating the gift and teachings of Scripture is another reason for joy (Colossians 3:16; Psalms 119:14).

**Genuine Fellowship:** The privilege of fellowship with other Christians consistently brings joy (1 Thessalonians 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:4).

**Proclamation of the Gospel:** Sharing and hearing the gospel's impact brings great joy, as it did in the early church (Acts 15:3; Philippians 1:18).

## 5:17 – Prayer

Prayer is a crucial spiritual tool that helps transform sorrow into joy during difficult times, reflecting our reliance on God. It serves not only to address personal needs but should be practiced continually in all situations, embodying non-stop communication with our heavenly Father. This emphasis on unceasing prayer is central to Paul's teachings, as seen in multiple passages,<sup>25</sup> mirroring his prayerful life. Like a father who delights in frequent communication with his children, we are encouraged to constantly connect with God, nurturing our relationship through persistent prayer.

### Things You Can Pray For Without Ceasing<sup>26</sup>

**Glorifying God:** The primary motivation for believers is to honor and glorify God, as Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-10).

**Fellowship with God:** Christians are driven by a deep longing for close communion with God, as expressed in the yearning of a deer for water (Psalm 42:1-2).

**Meeting Needs:** Prayer is a means to request daily provisions and specific needs from God (Matthew 6:11).

**Seeking Wisdom:** We should pray for divine wisdom to navigate life in a sinful world (James 1:5).

**Deliverance from Trouble:** Like Jonah's prayers from the belly of a fish, Christians pray for rescue from dire situations (Jonah 2:1-2).

**Relief from Anxiety:** Prayer is a tool to alleviate worry and bring peace to the mind and heart (Philippians 4:6-7).

**Gratitude for Blessings:** Thankfulness for God's past deeds and blessings motivates prayers of gratitude (Psalm 44:1-4).

**Cleansing from Sin:** Confession through prayer is a pathway to forgiveness and freedom from guilt (Psalm 32:5).

**Salvation of Others:** Concern for the spiritual well-being of others, mainly the unsaved, inspires prayers for their salvation (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

**Spiritual Growth:** We are to pray for personal growth and the local church's spiritual development to deepen our faith and understanding of God's love (Ephesians 3:14-21).

### **5:18 – Thankfulness**

Scripture frequently links prayer with thanksgiving, portraying gratitude as a form of prayer exemplified in the thanksgiving hymns of the Psalms. Paul consistently emphasizes this connection, viewing it as a fundamental part of his ministry philosophy and a spiritual duty for all Christians. He expresses this obligation in his letters, urging constant thanksgiving, particularly during hardships when remembering God's past help can be crucial (e.g., 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:13; Ephesians 5:4, 20; Philippians 4:6; Colossians 1:12, 3:15).

A life characterized by joy, prayer, and gratitude aligns with God's will, as defined in several scriptural passages (e.g., Mark 3:35; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 6:6; Colossians 4:12; Hebrews 10:36; 1 Peter 2:15). This lifestyle not only fulfills God's will but also pleases Him and must be pursued in union with Christ, relying on His empowering presence.

### **5:19-22: Don't Quench the Spirit**

Next, Paul stresses a prudent approach to prophecy within the church, emphasizing the importance of discernment. He instructs Christians to "test them all," implying that not all prophetic claims should be accepted without scrutiny. This guidance aligns with his instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:39-40, which address the desire to prophesy and speak in tongues but stress that these practices should be conducted in an orderly and appropriate manner.

Here, the teaching is summarized by two prohibitions followed by three positive commands, addressing issues related to the use of charismatic gifts. Some members were dismissive of all prophetic attempts, while others accepted prophetic claims without critical evaluation. Paul's solution is to carefully evaluate each claim to discern which are genuinely inspired by the Spirit and which are not, thereby fostering a balanced and Spirit-guided approach to prophecy in the church.

#### **5:19-20 – Don't Quench the Spirit**

The verb "stifle" is used to describe extinguishing a fire, illustrating the concept of either completely destroying something or imposing a restriction on it. In Thessalonica, it seems this term was associated with a movement against Spirit-inspired prophecy, where Paul uses it to caution against quenching the Holy Spirit's activity. He employs a "present-tense prohibition" in his grammar, instructing the church either to stop a current practice or to never engage in it, effectively critiquing their efforts to suppress prophetic expressions.

Fire is often used symbolically for the Holy Spirit, as seen in biblical events like Pentecost and in verses that highlight the Spirit's ongoing work in believers (e.g., Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:3; Romans 12:11). Paul underscores that stifling the Spirit is tantamount to opposing God Himself, considering the Spirit's role

as a seal of salvation (Ephesians 1:13-14). Thus, restricting the Spirit's expression is not just a suppression of individual gifts but a profound resistance against God.

The quenching of the Holy Spirit Paul mentions here stresses how the process of sanctification by the Spirit is not to be stifled. We must not hinder the Spirit's work of transformation within us. We must not hold back His work of:

- **Providing Intimacy with God:** The Spirit builds a deep, personal relationship with God within us, encouraging us to view Him as a loving father and to rely on His strength.
- **Christlikeness:** Through the Spirit, we are transformed to reflect Christ's image, a change that occurs as we engage deeply with Scripture and embrace its revelations about Christ.
- **Guidance in God's Will:** The Spirit ensures adherence to God's explicit commands and guides believers through life's decisions that align with His will.
- **Inner Strength:** The Spirit empowers us from within, enabling us to overcome sin and effectively live out our faith.

Quenching the Spirit can occur through neglecting Scripture, resisting intimacy with God, ignoring God's guidance, or relying on one's strength. Each of these resistances hampers the sanctification process. Thus, Paul stresses the importance of being open to and led by the Spirit, which involves continual submission to His power and guidance.

### ***5:21-22 – Test Everything***

Next, we see the importance of discernment in dealing with prophecies within the church. The church instructs believers to test prophetic statements to determine their authenticity rigorously. This involves evaluating both the content of the prophecies and the prophets' credibility to distinguish between true divine messages and those that are false or misleading.

In the scriptures, testing spirits and prophetic utterances was necessary because false prophets and teachers were prevalent. Paul references the spiritual gift of "distinguishing between spirits" (1 Corinthians 12:10) and advocates for testing the spirits (1 John 4:1) to see if they are genuinely from God, highlighting the need for vigilance.

The verb "test" calls for a thorough examination to verify whether something is genuine or counterfeit. This concept is akin to how trials are used biblically to test and refine our faith (James 1:3; 1 Peter 1:7). In this context, everything said by those claiming to be prophets must be scrutinized—both the individuals and their messages.

Upon successful evaluation, the church was to embrace those prophecies deemed "good" and genuinely inspired by God, holding fast to them as authentic messages intended to benefit the church. This involves actively maintaining and adhering to these truths as essential components of the Christian faith.

However, prophecies that fail to meet these criteria should be regarded as "evil" and be rejected outright. Paul categorizes false prophecies as part of a broader spectrum of evil that includes demonic influences and spiritual warfare, stressing their potential harm to the church's integrity and mission. The

Thessalonians were urged to actively avoid and disassociate from these deceptive and harmful teachings, similar to how they are instructed to abstain from other sinful behaviors like sexual immorality.

## 5:23-28: Final Greetings

### 5:23-24: A Prayer for Complete Sanctification

As Paul discusses, sanctification means "to set apart" or "to separate" from sin and towards holiness. It is an ongoing spiritual process by which God sets us apart, emphasizing our growth and maturity. This teaching is seen throughout Scripture, highlighted from Genesis through the New Testament, where people and objects are consecrated for God's purposes.

In the New Testament, sanctification has three primary aspects:

- **Initial Sanctification:** The first part of our sanctification occurs at salvation, on the occasion of baptism, where God's grace sets us apart through Christ's sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> It signifies a shift from the dominion of sin to the realm of God's righteousness (Colossians 1:12-14).
- **Progressive Sanctification:** This ongoing process involves our daily life, where we gradually conform to the image of Christ. It requires active effort and the Spirit's power, aiming for continual growth in holiness.<sup>28</sup>
- **Ultimate Sanctification:** This future aspect refers to the complete transformation of believers into sinlessness, both in spirit and body when Christ returns.<sup>29</sup>

While sanctification involves human effort, it depends on God's power and initiative. We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit, pursuing holiness while depending on divine strength (Ephesians. 6:10). The process integrates God's direct involvement in our lives, transforming us comprehensively.

In verse 23, Paul ambitiously prays for the Thessalonians, reassuring them that God will faithfully accomplish this significant work of sanctification in them. Recognizing human limitations in achieving holiness, Paul comforts them by highlighting God's unwavering lovingkindness and faithfulness, concepts deeply rooted in the Old Testament. For instance, Deuteronomy 7:9 and Isaiah 49:7 both affirm God's reliability and dedication to His people.

Paul assures the Thessalonians that they do not need to rely on their strength for their ultimate sanctification; they can depend on God's power and faithfulness. This is integral to the doctrine of the assurance of salvation, emphasizing that we are sustained by God's enduring commitment to us, as seen in 1 Peter 1:5 and 2 Thessalonians 3:3, where it is declared that God will fortify us and shield us from harm. Thus, Paul's message stresses the assurance that God will fulfill His promises, offering profound security to us in our spiritual lives.

### 5:25-27: Three Requests

Paul concludes his letter by emphasizing the reciprocal nature of prayer and those in the local church. He began the letter with gratitude and prayers for the Thessalonians and now seeks their prayers, showing the mutual support within the young but committed congregation. This indicates that prayer is

not only for times of crisis but should be a regular practice to deepen spiritual connections and invoke God's presence in daily life.

Paul also instructs them to greet all believers with a holy kiss, a familiar cultural gesture at the time. Still, a general principle here emphasizes love, unity, and reconciliation. This gesture was significant within the church, marking peace and deep fellowship, contrasting with the more superficial secular greetings.

Finally, Paul requests that his letter be read aloud to the entire community. This reflects the importance of inclusivity and addresses everyone, especially those who may be causing divisions or are disconnected from the community. This public reading ensures everyone hears his teachings and exhortations directly, enhancing communal understanding and unity.

### ***5:28 – Closing Benediction***

Paul consistently concludes his letters with a grace-blessing, echoing the greetings at the start, similar to what he does in Romans 16:20 and 1 Corinthians 16:23. This recurrent theme demonstrates the central role of grace in his teachings. Grace is foundational to the messages of his epistles, emphasizing that all eternal blessings, particularly salvation, are received through the grace of God. In this letter to the Thessalonians, Paul highlights that grace brings salvation and empowers believers to grow spiritually and resolve community conflicts. He attributes this grace to "the Lord Jesus Christ," reinforcing Jesus' lordship and His critical role in bestowing grace. Paul's prayer is that Christ's grace will profoundly impact the believers, guiding them to internalize and live out the teachings of his letter.

## **What's In This for Us?**

**Embrace Joy in All Circumstances:** Paul's exhortation to "rejoice always" teaches us to find joy in our circumstances and deep relationship with God. Despite challenges or hardships, believers are encouraged to maintain a joyful spirit made possible through the Holy Spirit's presence.

**Commit to Constant Prayer:** Understanding that prayer is our direct line to God, Paul emphasizes the importance of continuous communication with God. This should include prayers for personal needs and others, aiming to strengthen our relationship with God and align ourselves with His will.

**Cultivate a Thankful Heart:** Paul links thanksgiving with prayer, urging believers to maintain a posture of gratitude in all aspects of life. This gratitude should extend beyond personal blessings to include an appreciation for the spiritual growth and community among believers.

**Practice Discernment in Spiritual Matters:** Regarding prophecies and spiritual gifts, Paul instructs believers to "test everything" to discern what is truly from God. This calls for a thoughtful examination of spiritual messages and teachings, ensuring they align with biblical truth and promoting edification within the church community.

## **Conclusion**

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians provides spiritual guidance that continues to resonate deeply with modern Christians. Paul outlines a framework for a solid Christian life rooted in spiritual maturity and church harmony by emphasizing joy, prayer, gratitude, and discernment. We are encouraged to maintain

a joyful dependence on God, engage in constant and thoughtful prayer, cultivate a spirit of thankfulness, and exercise discernment in all spiritual matters.

As we apply these principles, we enrich our faith and strengthen the bonds within the local church. Embracing these lessons can help us navigate the challenges of contemporary life while upholding the values and practices that define a life committed to following Christ. Through thoughtful discussion and application of Paul's teachings, we can aspire to live lives pleasing to God and edifying to one another, fully embodying the calling of our faith in every aspect of our existence.

## Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How can we cultivate a habit of "rejoicing always," even in difficult circumstances? Can you share a personal experience where you found joy during a trial?
2. What role does prayer play in your daily life? How can we encourage one another to pray more consistently and meaningfully?
3. In what ways can we actively cultivate gratitude in our lives, especially during difficult times?
4. How do you personally test and discern the validity of spiritual messages or teachings that you encounter? What criteria do you use?
5. Discuss the impact of spiritual blessings in your life. How do these blessings influence your daily actions and attitudes?
6. Paul discusses the importance of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit's guidance or conviction?
7. How can we support and pray for our church leaders and each other, as Paul requested prayers for himself and his team?
8. What does greeting each other with a "holy kiss" mean in today's cultural context? How can we translate this practice into modern expressions of genuine affection and unity within the church?
9. Paul emphasizes the importance of reading his letters to the entire community. How does this principle apply to how we handle Scripture in the church today?
10. Reflecting on the idea of not quenching the Spirit, can you think of ways we might stifle the Spirit's work in our personal lives or the local church? How can we be more open to the Spirit's movements?



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<sup>24</sup> MacArthur, p. 185.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 12:12; Philippians 4:6; Colossians 4:2; Ephesians 6:18.

<sup>26</sup> MacArthur, p. 187.

<sup>27</sup> See Titus 3:5-8; Colossians 2:11-14; Romans 6:1-7.

<sup>28</sup> See 2 Corinthians 3:18; Titus 3:8; 2 Peter 3:18.

<sup>29</sup> See Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 5:25-27; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 John 3:1-3.