

It is an absolute joy to be together this morning and worship the Lord. As Noah and I talked about this service, we agreed we wanted a time of extended worship, to sing praises to God, and proclaim his Word. But I also realized this morning was an opportunity to experience and be reminded of something we have as followers of Jesus that honors God and renews us.

Over the last six months a certain word has been thrown around so much it's become part of our everyday vernacular. Frankly, I'm sick of it. The word is "pivot". It's this idea of having to turn and go a new direction, and all of us have been forced to do so in a number of different ways: pivot how we do school, do our jobs, shop for groceries, live out our relationships with others, manage our finances, make long-term plans, even get married. Pivoting requires effort and energy and it's exhausting, and it even makes you come up with crazy ideas like doing church in Dallas in August in a parking lot! But there is one pivot that doesn't exhaust but rejuvenates.

Let me ask you: how would it go if you walked up to someone on the street today and said, "Rejoice and be thankful"? You'd probably get mocked at best and maybe punched in the face at worst. For most people, suffering, trial, difficulty cannot co-exist with joy and gratitude. But that is not true for a follower of Christ. In times of trial, Scripture tells us there is a pivot to be made, a three-fold pivot that includes what we have been doing this morning. It is the alternative choice, the alternative direction, all believers have to letting their life be dictated by circumstances. It is a pivot commanded by Scripture but, more than that, it is something we should be eager to do because this pivot brings glory to God and revives our spirit.

[1 Thessalonians 5:16-18] ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

At the end of the Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church, he has the audacity to tell them their lives should be defined by joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. This is a church experiencing hard times under heavy persecution from both Jews and Romans, and many are struggling financially. Yet Paul, who affirms and empathizes with their difficulties in the letter, says their lives can and should be full of rejoicing, prayer and gratitude. You may hear that and ask, "How is that even possible?" Your pain isn't likely from persecution, but it is from things like fear, loneliness, hardship, illness, hopelessness, grief, and I want to acknowledge that. We are in hard times, and I'm praying for all of you. **But God's Word says our pain can coexist with joy, prayer, and thanksgiving.** Let's talk about how we can make that pivot, and what it leads to.

Joy occurs when we delight in the presence and promises of God. Joy is the expression of a heart that recognizes all we have been given in Christ. Joy remembers and responds to the magnificent truth of the Gospel; that we have been reconciled to God through the work of Christ, declared righteous and forgiven of our sins, that we have entered into an eternal relationship with God and nothing can cut us off from his love, and we have been made new and can live with purpose today. You may need to be reminded of that this morning. Joy comes when the uncertainty of the day is met with the certainty of God's promises. Joy comes when we feel like this pandemic is going to last forever, but then we remember that the Kingdom of God will last forever, and you are a citizen of it. Joy comes when we remember our lives are not defined by a what but by a whom, that your circumstances do not dictate the value of your life, but our identity in and union with Christ does. When we remember those things, we pivot from hopelessness to hopefulness,

from despairing to rejoicing. If you are struggling to rejoice, preach the gospel to yourself and to one another to be reminded of the glorious, joy-inducing good news of Jesus Christ.

Joy is also a fruit of the Spirit. It comes when we abide, make our home, in God. A primary way we do that is prayer, which is why Paul follows it up with that command. Prayer is presence. It's a declaration of dependence on God as you enter into fellowship with him to be with him and let him minister to you. I spoke with a woman from our church this week who said she has to start her day entering the presence of God if she is going to get through it. It's the greatest desire of her heart and greatest need of her life. She couldn't go on without it. Her mornings start with a choice: face the challenges of the day on her own, or pivot towards God before she does anything else. **This is not about ritual. This is about relationship.** Some of you are barely hanging on right now, but you don't have to go through it alone. There is a God who loves you and is eager for you to come to him. To experience joy, go to its source. And if you need some help in how to do that, listen to our prayer podcast that our Life Groups team has created.

And as we pray, it is vital that we include thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the expression of gratitude for who God is and what he has done. Every good and perfect gift in our life is from above, and thanksgiving is the conscious decision to pivot your focus on the blessings of life and the fact that God is working all circumstances for our good, even those that are intensely painful.

When we focus on just our suffering, we get out of balance. Many of you know I was an accountant, and the #1 rule in accounting is that your debits must equal your credits. If they don't, you're out of balance and the whole thing falls apart. It's the same with our hearts. When we are in seasons of difficulty and we focus only on that, we get out of balance, and we too risk falling apart. But when we pivot to not only focus on the difficulties of our life but also God's blessings and work in our life, thanksgiving gives him the worship he is due, most importantly, and it changes us in the process. Grateful people are happy people, and there is always something in our life to thank God for.

None of these pivots deny the pain of our suffering. God loves us too much to be indifferent to that, and sometimes our rejoicing and thanksgiving may sound more like a whimper or whisper. But even that pivot proclaims there is something greater than your circumstances, something greater than your pain, and that you are going to hang on to and trust in God in the worst times.

I don't want you to miss the last thing Paul says: "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." We can read that and hear that God *commands*...you better do it! **But remember, God loves us and his will is always what is best for us.** He knows there will be seasons of life like these, and he loves us enough to give us a remedy. Do you believe him? I'm confident that if we make these pivots individually and collectively, the result will be God's glory, joyful hearts and revived spirits, and a contagious people that will make an exhausted, hopeless, and overwhelmed world curious about how that could possibly be true of us. (Neighboring series)

So here's how we want to close this morning. In your cars or in your homes, we want you to rejoice, we want you to offer prayers of thanksgiving, and we'd love for you to do that out loud. Noah is going to play some music over you as you lift up your prayers to the Lord, and then we are going to end the morning with a song called *Grateful*.