

December 14, 2014
Advent 3

“Rejoice! The Lord Is Always Faithful!”

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24

Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil. ²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

This past week I visited Molly Webb at the Mission View Care Center in San Luis Obispo. As I walked down the hall toward her room, a woman in a wheel chair called out to me, “Can you help me?” I stopped and she cried out, “Can you help me, I don’t know where I am?” I thought to myself, “What if that were me?”

Who knows what changes can come into our lives that totally alter our circumstances? That is why it is so comforting to hear these words “The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.” He will enable you to rise above your circumstances. Even in the most trying of times you will be able with the Lord’s help to “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances.”

The Christians living in Thessalonica found great joy in the Lord. They were even a model Christian congregation, yet they were a suffering congregation because of the persecution they experienced for their faith. In the first part of this letter Paul writes, “In spite of severe suffering; you welcomed the message with joy given by the Holy Spirit.” They knew the Lord would be faithful even in times of severe suffering for their faith. Let’s go through these verses before us with this import thought in mind, “**Rejoice! The Lord Is Always Faithful.**”

“Be joyful always!”

That almost seems cruel does it not? To tell a person to be joyful always when they are suffering for their faith, or suffering because of some big change in their lives? That seems like the height of cruelty unless there is always a reason to be joyful.

That certainly is the case with your life dear Christian. Look at what your God has done for you in the past. Let that fill your life with daily joy. Your God has given you the gift of his Son. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Our Lord and God from all eternity took on our flesh. He became one of us. He was fully human and tempted in all parts as we are. He lived the perfect life we could never live. The tiny hands of a little baby lying in a manger were the hands of God nailed to the cross for your sins. Psalm 103 describes in the past tense why the present joy is always there for us. “Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your sins and heals all our diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion.” No matter what the future brings, these past blessings are already yours in Christ and they fill your present life with joy.

Then there are the blessings that are already waiting for you in the future. Paul told the suffering

Christians in Thessalonica to eagerly look forward to Jesus coming again in glory on the last day. "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice an archangel and the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." Then we will we also be caught up with them in the clouds and we will join our loved ones who died in Jesus to meet him in the air. What joy will be ours if Jesus returns in glory even before Christmas comes! That very real hope in the future fills us with daily joy whatever our personal struggles may be.

"Pray continually."

If I want to talk to my wife Susan or one of my children, I can dial their number and hopefully I will get through. With the Lord, you don't even have to dial his number. The line of prayer is always open. We did not earn this privilege. How could a person like me who separates himself from God by sin ever have such a privilege? You know why the door is always open. The answer is found in Romans 5 where it says, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."

I don't have to clap my hands to get the attention of my God as the Buddhists do. I don't have to kneel down on prayer rug five times a day and pray towards Mecca as the Muslims do. I have direct access to God because Jesus has justified me or declared me not guilty. That is why Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you." The Lord is faithful. He leads us to pray to him continually especially when we are going through rough patches in our lives.

"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

The Lord is so faithful to you that he will even enable you to give thanks during the most trying times of life. Look again at the life of Job. He lost his vast wealth of cattle and sheep and servants and camels. Then a windstorm far more powerful than we experienced this past week knocked down the house where his children were gathered. All ten of his children died. It is hard enough to lose one child. Think of losing ten children, and maybe even their spouses and grandchildren. The Lord who is faithful gave Job the strength to say, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

There is a story told of a prosperous young executive who was driving his shiny black BMW to work one morning. As he pulled up to the stop sign he saw a boy pick up a stone and throw it at his shiny new car. He pulled over, grabbed the boy and said, "Look at the dent you put into my car." The boy started crying and said, "I wanted to get your attention. It is my older brother. He fell out of his wheel chair and I can't get him back in." Suddenly the anger in the young man's face changed to compassion. He went over to where the older brother had fallen and helped him back into his chair and made sure he was OK. Then he looked at the dent. He never had it fixed. He wanted the dent to remind him not to be so caught up with the many blessings in life that we forget to be thankful to the Lord and help others.

The Lord our God who is faithful will find multiple ways to help us see the blessings we have in Christ so that we are always thankful in all circumstances. As Paul wrote in another letter about the secret of being content in all circumstances. "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living or in plenty or in want." Then he goes on to say, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." The Lord who calls is faithful. He gives us the strength to be thankful in every situation.

So we continue with even more joy the Lord wants to bring in your life. These might not seem like joys to you but they are. **“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”** The Holy Spirit is your comforter. Jesus said the Holy Spirit teaches us all things and brings everything into us of everything Jesus said to us. Oh, what a holy fire and zeal and glow comes into our lives as the Holy Spirit leads us to kneel in faith and worship a baby born in Bethlehem as our Lord and God. The joy of the shepherds becomes our joy. We don’t want to put out the Spirit’s fire. With a fire you add more wood or more coals to keep it going. You do not pour water on the fire or it will extinguish the flames. Read your Bible. Read it a little each day and the Holy Spirit will keep that fire going. You will never grow tired of saying or singing, “Living, loving, dying rising, Jesus did it all for me.”

Joy can come to us in the strangest places. It can come from someone who proclaims the Word of God boldly to us or from someone who witnesses to us of their faith. That is what is meant by the word “prophecy.” Please, please, don’t ever marginalize what another Christian says to you about Jesus their Savior. Take it to heart. These words do not have to come from a dynamic pastor or some well known Bible teacher. They can come to you from ordinary, garden variety Christians like you and me. You will be richly blessed if you listen to their words and take them to heart.

Joy comes when we are able to **test everything** and **hold on to the good** and **avoid every kind of evil**. Our Lord Jesus warned us that in the last days there will be many false teachers who go out into the world. Paul warned his much loved Christian congregations about false teachers coming into the church and undermining the truth of the gospel. He told the Christians in Galatia, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.” Taking a stand for the Christian faith and for the gospel of our Lord Jesus is not a burden it is a blessing. It is not a hassle, it is a privilege. It is not something that brings us sorrow but actually brings us joy. I have nothing to offer God to atone for even one sin that I committed in my thoughts this past week. Jesus has everything to offer me. He offers me full pardon and full cleansing. It is a privilege to be used by the Lord to reject any teaching that takes away from what Jesus has done.

We hold onto what is good and reject what is evil. Because of who you are in Christ you want to produce fruit in your life that pleases the Lord. Jesus is the Vine and you are a branch connected to him. He is the bridegroom and you are his beloved bride. What a joy and privilege it is to read these words of Paul from Philippians and say, “This is who I am in Christ.” Philippians 4 says, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, if anything is excellent or praise-worthy- think about such things.” The Lord your God is faithful. He will do it. He will produce amazing fruit in your life out of love for Jesus, including the fruit that says no to sin and no to false teaching.

The Lord is faithful. His plan is to sanctify you through and through which means to set you apart for his glory. His plan is to keep you blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. I struggle with sinful thoughts each day and each hour and so do you. Always there is the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin. With the prophet Isaiah we say, “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.” Rejoice! Be happy! The Lord is faithful. The Lord is **always** faithful. Amen.

