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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago IL

“GOD’S WILL FOR YOU”
First Thessalonians 5:16-18

□ First Thessalonians 5:16-18: **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

Can the apostle Paul be serious? *Does he mean what he says?*

Although he occasionally uses an ironical tone in his letters, it is clear from the context that this is not one of those cases. He means exactly what he says.

But *is this possible?* Can anyone other than some super-saint consistently rejoice, pray, and give thanks?

I suggest to you that not only is this feasible for every Christ Follower, by the grace of God it can be our default setting.

Right about now someone is thinking: “Anyone who says that must have a cushy life.” Please don’t tune me out! I am blessed; yet I have also suffered and struggled.

→ More importantly, Paul repeatedly contended with extraordinarily severe hardships:

I have...been in prison..., been flogged ... and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I

have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Co. 11:23-27)

This was written 3 or 4 years after First Thessalonians. Still, some of these ordeals occurred very early in his ministry. Any fantasies Paul ever had of an easy life were beaten out of him before he exhorted us to **“rejoice ... pray...”** and **“give thanks.”**

The question remains: *How can we do this?*

Let’s start by clarifying what God, speaking through his apostle, does not mean.

⊙ **“Rejoice always”** is not a demand for constant emotional happiness. That would contradict the example set by Jesus, the witness of God’s people, and teachings like **“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn”** (Romans 12:15). Feelings are not the focus of this command.

⊙ **“Pray continually”** is not a demand for endless formal prayers. That would hinder basic discipleship. How can we {Mt 22:39} love our neighbors and {Mt 28:19} **“go and make disciples”** if our eyes are always closed, our heads always bowed, our hands always folded? Ritual is not the focus of this command.

⊖ **“Give thanks”** is not a demand for gratitude for every circumstance. Appreciation for the agonies caused by sin would be equivalent to blaming God, and James 1:13 warns that **“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”** Circumstances are not the focus of this command.

So *what is the Lord saying?*

⊗ 1st, God is calling us to act in collaboration with him.

Verse 18 says: **“this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** What is more, these commands assume an ongoing relationship of dependency, trust and love for him: **“Rejoice always”** corresponds to Php. 4:4 (**“Rejoice in the Lord always”**); **“pray continually”** echoes Ephesians 6:18 (**“pray in the Spirit on all occasions”**); and **“give thanks”** confirms Roman. 1:8 (**“I thank my God through Jesus Christ”**). We can fulfill **“God’s will”** in relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The LORD does not order us to stagger along under an unbearable burden, and then stand by to watch us fail. Just the opposite, he says **“Rejoice,” “pray,”** and **“give thanks”** as he comes alongside and shares the load and even strengthens us from within.

⊗ 2nd, God is calling us to act as a body first, as individuals second.

Context is always critical to the meaning of Scripture. Verses 16-18 immediately follow a series of instructions to {5:12-15} respect our leaders, **“live in peace,” “warn [the] idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone,”** and **“do what is good for”** others. He sets

the call to **“Rejoice,” pray,”** and **“give thanks”** in a context of cooperative ministry and mission, mutual accountability and investment, and reciprocal love. This is about doing life together.

As good, North American individualists we tend to think that strong individual disciples produce a strong Church. The biblical view is that a strong Church produces strong individual disciples.

We can learn how to rejoice, pray, and give thanks with and in the body, then go do it on our own.

⊗ 3rd, God is calling us to act intentionally.

To **“rejoice always”** is to celebrate God and his goodness, regardless of your feelings.

To **“pray continually”** is to have unbroken fellowship with the Lord, listening closely for his voice and speaking often with him.

To **“give thanks in all circumstances”** is to express gratitude for God’s kindness in happy times, God’s help in hardship, and God’s mercy when we fail.

These do not depend on emotion, ritual, or circumstance. They do require: remembrance of what God has done in the past; sensitivity to what God is doing in the present; and the choice to {2 Co 5:7} **“live by faith”** as {2 Co 10:5} **“we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ,”** {Heb 12:2} **“fixing our eyes on Jesus”** who, **“for the joy set before him...endured the cross.”**

Brothers and sisters, isn’t this Good News?!

None of us can always control what we feel, none of us can devote all our waking hours to formal prayer, none of us can honestly appreciate every

circumstance (much less control our circumstances to make them all happy ones) .

Yet, by the power of the One {Php 1:6} **“who began a good work in [us]”** and who **“will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”** we can resolve to collaborate with the Lord, to help each other, and to obey God instead of our fallible feelings and changing circumstances!

Today, this Thanksgiving, and every day, let us join together and **“Rejoice always, pray continually,”** and **“give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for [us] in Christ Jesus.”**