

## 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

***16Rejoice always, 17pray without ceasing, 18give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19Do not quench the Spirit. 20Do not despise prophecies, 21but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22Abstain from every form of evil.***

Is there anyone like the Apostle Paul that can say so much with so little? The imperatives of vv.16-22 succinctly pack a powerful punch. Here, Paul interjects eight more commands that are not just essential to our Christian character but fundamental for the health and strength of the church. If these qualities were exhibited within the life of the individual Believer, collectively they could intensify the vigor of the entire congregation. Let's consider each of these imperatives exclusively.

### ***Rejoice Always***

There are 233 results for the term, *rejoice*, in the English Standard Version of the Bible. That's a fair amount of rejoicing. Those occurrences consist of times of rejoicing over Christian companionship (Phil. 2:28), requests in prayer (Psalm 85:6, 90:14), as a description of personal or corporate emotion (1 Chron. 15:25, 2 Cor. 7:16; 2 John 4) and many commands to *rejoice* similar to that of 5:16.

*Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.*<sup>1</sup> Psalm 2:11

*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:12a

*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:12

**In the realm of the exhortation to *rejoice*, let's go ahead and ask the obvious question lurking behind our uncertainty:**

***“What if I don't have a single thing to be joyful about?”***

**On this life voyage where financial burdens pile up, sorrow devastates, temptations seize and evil looms it leaves little to wonder why many feel *joyless*.**

<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ps 2:11). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 5:12). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ro 12:12). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

## *A search for Joy*

As I recently sat in the driver seat of my car meditating on this very instruction to *rejoice always*, there wasn't a single thing inside me wanting to do so – for a variety of reasons. Mostly to blame was a sudden burst of heartache that encompassed me like the clingy wrap on a covered dish. I wanted to thrust past it and exerted the effort to do so by quietly repeating the phrase over and over, “*Rejoice. Rejoice...rejoice always.*” In my desperate desire to quickly become numb to the grief, I could not. The tidal wave of emotion gained ground and there was no escaping. Yet, I simultaneously recalled Paul's words to the Thessalonians in their questions concerning the dead in Christ. If you remember, Paul didn't tell them *not* to grieve but rather that they shouldn't grieve as others who didn't have *hope*. Although my sorrow did not concern a matter of physical death, saturated in this nugget of truth regarding hope was the catch-22 that shoved me into rejoicing.

In the anxiety of financial difficulty, we can know the Lord has said He is our Provider (Luke 12:22-30).

When tragedy, trial or despair leaves us shattered, we can know He holds us close and bandages our wounds (Psalm 34:18, 147:3).

When temptation grasps at our heels we raise our shield of faith (Eph. 6:11,16) and stand confident that we are not facing some new insurmountable trick by the adversary (1 Cor. 10:13).

And when the darkness seems to have captured our entire world, we walk tranquilly as children of light (1 Thess. 5:4) in anticipation of the Day of the Lord.

Believer, I think we often make the mistake of thinking rejoicing can only mean jubilant faces over blissful circumstances. Sometimes, joy is having made it to the top of a very steep mountain but with awfully calloused feet and multiple abrasions. The picture here is anything but harmonious or enjoyable – still, there's victory. The path is full of thorns and we're likely to get pricked a time or two on the way, but it's in the Light of promises like Romans 8:28, Ephesians 2:10 and 2 Corinthians 4 that press us onward.

*We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed...*

*Therefore, we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:8-9, 16-18 CSB)*

When received by faith, these assurances can effectively give way to a lasting, forever-kind-of joy.

## Unceasing Prayer

Reflect on the definition for *prayer* from Easton's Bible Dictionary.

*"Prayer is converse with God; the intercourse of the soul with God, not in contemplation or meditation, but in direct address to him. Prayer may be oral or mental, occasional or constant, ejaculatory or formal. It is a 'beseeching the Lord' (Ex. 32:11); 'pouring out the soul before the Lord' (1 Sam. 1:15); 'praying and crying to heaven' (2 Chr. 32:20); 'seeking unto God and making supplication' (Job 8:5); 'drawing near to God' (Ps. 73:28); 'bowing the knees' (Eph. 3:14)."*<sup>4</sup>

Scripture is drenched like a sopping wet towel with references of the importance of prayer. From the opening pages of Genesis we see Adam and Eve conversing with God and God with them. Furthermore, "Israel is a nation born of prayer. Abraham heard God's call (Gen. 12:1-3), and God heard the cries of the Hebrew children (Exod. 3:7). Moses conversed with God (Exod. 3:1-4:17) and interceded for Israel (Exod. 32:11-13; Num. 11:11-15)."<sup>5</sup> Holding enormous significance to us is the fact that *Jesus Himself* demonstrated an intense prayer life (Matt. 14:23) and also found it necessary to teach us how to pray (Matt. 6:5, 9-13). Additionally, in the early days of the New Testament church, the disciples felt the need to be *devoted* to prayer *along with* their ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). For us as ministers of the new covenant, this shows the importance of devotion in prayer as we embark on the task of sharing the gospel.

The book of James crushes distrust we might have concerning the proficiency of prayer asserting: *the prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect* (James 5:16). The Gospel of Mark in Chapter 9 holds an intriguing scene that shows likewise the immense power prayer holds. The setting entails a boy plagued by an unclean spirit that has thrown him to the ground in convulsions since childhood. A desperate father brings his son to Jesus because the disciples (despite having been given the power to do so – Matt. 6:13) were unable to heal the boy. After delivering a rebuke for their lack of faith, Jesus enlightens the disciples that this kind of demon could *only be driven out by prayer* (Mark 9:29). If Jesus' words do not prove the necessity and effect of prayer, what could?

Many of us have either prayed prayers before, or are presently praying for things that have gone unanswered. The prospect for shackles to buckle around and restrain our faith in these times is more than just probable. We intrinsically expect A (prayer coupled with faith) plus B (the belief God hears) to equal C (answered prayer). This is the titanic of moments, the battleground for us in the fight of faith where we have to hold Isaiah 55:8-11 with a tense grip.

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. Isaiah 55:8*

We take that promise and declare it boldly with our mouths until our heart catches up with it. When we are overrun with doubt and unbelief, we must cry out to Jesus like the desperate father of Mark 9,

*"Help my unbelief."*

**And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. Mark 1:35**

*For building a deeper prayer life try praying out-loud using Scripture.*

*Try starting with the Psalms, or pray using the books of Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians.*

*Most importantly, ASK the Lord to grow your prayer life!*

*Keep a separate journal to record prayer requests for others.*

<sup>4</sup> Easton, M. G. (1893). In *Easton's Bible dictionary*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

<sup>5</sup> Hatchett, R. (2003). *Prayer*. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1320). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

If we believe that prayer is an essential part of our spiritual lives, then there's no surprise that Paul, who also modeled a praying life (Acts 16:16a; Rom. 1:10; Eph. 1:16; Phil. 1:9), would instruct the Thessalonians to pray *always*. Every situation, even in our day-to-day mundane, presents opportunities to talk to the Lord. Developing a deep and effective devotion to prayer will perhaps be one of the greatest challenges to us. You can be sure of this – the Adversary is hoping you'll remain *prayer-less*. If prayer is a place of comfort, a pathway for gaining strength, a conversation with our Sovereign Maker, a place of worshipful praise to the Giver and lifting up all that we ache for, the Enemy of our soul is set upon launching a continued assault to block us.

***“You’ll always be a little too tired, a little too busy. BUT IF, like Jesus you realize you can’t do life on your own, then no matter how busy, no matter how tired you are, you will find the time to pray.”***

- ***Paul Miller, A Praying Life*** (emphasis mine).

So then, soldier, how about some resolve in prayer? Then tie that resolve to a little mustard seed of faith.

### ***Unending Thanks***

In many ways, the call to joy is like the call to be thankful. *Thankful*, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, is defined as *conscious of benefit received*.<sup>6</sup> If we find ourselves *unthankful* we have become sorely unmindful of what we have been given in Christ. In our sin, we are destined for wrath. WRATH! Yet for those in Christ, in His selfless love He *delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins* (Col. 1:13). Scripture speaks to the severity of thanklessness in Romans 1:21 - *for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks*. People in the last days are characterized as *ungrateful* in 2 Timothy 3:2. Yet, to a heart desiring for His ways, Paul's proclamation, *for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*, is like a catapult hurling us into bountiful thanks.

In Disney's film, *Pollyanna*, the actress Hayley Mills plays a young girl whose missionary father taught her a game to enforce the concept of being grateful for what they had.<sup>7</sup> “The Glad Game” was played precisely like the title implies. At the onset of feelings that provoked ingratitude, she was encouraged to play the game and find *something* to be grateful for. In seasons where we find it difficult to be thankful maybe we could benefit from a round of “The Glad Game.” There is always, always, *something* to be grateful for. Even if Jesus never did another thing for us, the Cross was enough.

*The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.* <sup>8</sup> Psalm 126:3

<sup>6</sup> Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). [Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary](#). (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

<sup>7</sup> Walt Disney's, *Pollyanna*. Copyright Disney Enterprises, Inc. 1960

<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ps 126:3). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

## ***The Spirit and Prophecy***

The New American Commentary (NAC) states that the exhortations that are given in vv.19-22 “represent an attempt to help the church maintain its trim in the storm currents of conflicting truth claims (Eph. 4:14).”<sup>9</sup> In teaching, “*Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies.*” it is obvious that Paul wanted the church to be careful not to *toss out* or treat prophecy with contempt or unbelief. He did however instruct them to *test it* and *hold on* to that which was *good*.

This subject has been known to bring on debate amongst theologians. There are those who wish to quickly read passages such as these and move past them. Then there are those swinging in the opposite direction, giving it their total concentration. So, what do we do with this text? We embrace it as a beautiful portion of the Canon of Scripture that is deserving of our earnest attention and avoid a mere “skip-over.” Furthermore, we ask the Lord to reveal His truth to us.

Paul stresses to the group of believers not to quench the Spirit. The Greek word for “quench” is *sbēnnumi*, meaning to *extinguish (lit. or fig.); to go out, quench*.<sup>10</sup> Mull over this quote from Rick Renner relating to 1 Thess. 5:19.

“If you’ve ever seen a campfire, you know that its flames can burn very bright and hot. But what happens if someone keeps throwing water on the coals? Initially it will only dampen the heat of the flames. But if the person continues to throw water on the flames, eventually that water will quench, smother, or put out the fire altogether.”<sup>11</sup>

Scripture teaches us that upon salvation we were sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13). The Spirit searches the depths of God, knows His thoughts and interprets spiritual truths to those who are spiritual (1 Cor. 2:10-16). The Spirit is said to help a believer in times of weakness and act as an intercessor on their behalf (Rom 8:26-27). “In His conversation with Nicodemus (John 3), Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind in that one cannot see it, but one can see its effects.”<sup>12</sup> As we merge these truths, we plainly see the consequence of quenching the Spirit.

As God’s people must be careful not to stifle the Spirit, they were also not to look down upon prophecy. If the same instruction is for us today, we must define prophecy so we’re sure not to scorn it. The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines *prophecy* as the reception and declaration of a word from the Lord through a direct prompting of the Holy Spirit and the human instrument thereof.<sup>13</sup>

If the purpose of prophecy is for the encouragement and edification of the church (1 Cor.14:3) then our call to value prophecy rather than despise it is indisputable. While it is important we see the spiritual worth of prophecy individually, we must also see its merit corporately in our congregations. While the term “everything” in

<sup>9</sup> Martin, Michael D. *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen, B&H Publishing Group, 1995. The New American Commentary.

<sup>10</sup> Strong, J. (1996). *The New Strong’s Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>11</sup> Renner, Rick. *Sparkling Gems From the Greek*. Harrison House Publishers. Copyright 2003. Taken from entry for February 16<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Bond, S. (2003). *Spirit*. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1527). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

<sup>13</sup> Hatchett, R. (2003). *Prophecy, Prophets*. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1333). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

5:21 is wide-ranging and could include more, in this context, it may refer mostly to prophecy that's delivered to the congregation as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Thus, making it all the more critical to *test*.

Unless the spiritual gifts revealed to us in 1 Corinthians 12 have suddenly changed, the gift of prophecy still exists as the Lord wills (1 Cor. 12:11). "Rather than accept everything (leading to confusion and error) or reject everything (leading to the loss of true prophecies along with the false), the church was to examine carefully everything, using the criteria Jesus and his apostles provided for recognizing false prophets."<sup>15</sup> False prophets and erroneous teaching exists in our day just as it did for the Thessalonians. Jesus warned his followers, "*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*"<sup>16</sup> It is vitally important we test all prophecy and teaching to make sure Scripture supports it.

**See also:**  
**Matt. 7:16,**  
**24:11,24**

**2 Peter**  
**1:19-2:1;**

**1 John 4:1;**

If prophecy withstands the test, Paul exhorts believers to consider it *good* and *hold fast to it*. *Hold fast* in the Greek means more than just taking possession, it also means to keep something within our memory.<sup>17</sup>

I'll never forget the day I sat across from a mature and favorably recognized woman in my congregation. She was like the matriarch of prayer – the one whom everyone darted to with requests and she graciously accepted every one. She saw it as her privilege and great honor. I had been divinely assigned to deliver a gift to her because she and her husband were homebound. She unexpectedly invited me into her study for coffee. During my time with her she gently spoke words that seemed to be more *over me* than *to me* - like a prediction or foresight. I sat wide-eyed as she communicated things to me that *no one else knew anything about*. I left that time with her and was overwhelmingly spurred on in the faith. The things she expressed to me did not go against the Word of God, so I held on to them. Several years later, that which she uttered to me on that day came to fruition. When I think back on that day, it still fans the flames of my faith.

Believer, you can call that coincidence if you'd like, but that's not where I choose to land on this one. Prophecy that is tested and judged as worthy can serve to build up the body all the more as it is remembered.

### ***Avoid Evil***

The Expositors Bible Commentary suggests "Paul very clearly intends an antithesis with v. 21 here. 'Hold fast' (v. 21) to the good, but 'hold yourselves free from' (NIV, "avoid," v. 22) every kind of evil that tries to parade as a genuine representation of the Spirit."<sup>18</sup> It is only when God's people are abstaining from evil that they can thrive as a corporate body and as a light to the darkness.

*Look carefully, then, how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:15-16*

<sup>14</sup> Martin, Michael D. *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen, B&H Publishing Group, 1995. The New American Commentary.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Mt 7:15). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>17</sup> Strong, J. (1996). *The New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, R. L. (1981). *1 Thessalonians*. In F. E. Gaebelein (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon* (Vol. 11, p. 293). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.