

Grace Evangelical Free Church  
Issues & Answers: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (Thanksgiving)

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: Rejoice evermore. <sup>17</sup>Pray without ceasing. <sup>18</sup>In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

For a way to express their thankfulness for survival and the first harvest, the deeply reverent Pilgrims looked to the Bible. They found the celebrated Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), or Feast of Ingathering. The ingathering of Israelites (delivered from the desert of Sinai) and their harvest were celebrated in this feast and is the most joyous of all feasts still today (Leviticus 23).

Scripturally, we find events, memorials and commands related to the issue of thanksgiving nearly from cover to cover. Individuals offered up sacrifices out of gratitude in the book of Genesis. The Israelites sang a song of thanksgiving as they were delivered from Pharaoh's army after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15). Later, the Mosaic Law set aside three times each year when the Israelites were to gather together. All three of these times - Unleavened Bread (also called the Feast of the Passover - Exodus 12:15-20), Harvest or Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-21), and the Feast of Ingathering or Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-36) involved remembering God's provision and grace. Harvest and Tabernacles took place specifically in relation to God's provision in the harvest of various fruit trees and crops. The book of Psalms is packed full of songs of thanksgiving, both for God's grace to the Israelite people as a whole through His mighty deeds, as well as for His individual acts of grace extended to each of us.

Another reference to giving thanks is found in the account of 'setting' what Samuel called *the Ebenezer Stone*. This was a memorial to remind them to be grateful for God's help during an attack from the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:10-12). Other verses that include thanks can be read in Ps. 100:4; 105:1; and 1 Corinthians 15:57.

All early celebrations had one common focus -- God. Thanksgiving was directed toward God, their Creator, Protector, and Provider. They believed that all good things ultimately came from Him as we do today (Ps. 84:11). What constitutes thanksgiving? How often are we to thank God? Is this a personal or corporate responsibility? Is it acceptable to celebrate the modern Thanksgiving holiday? To determine the Biblical answers, we look to:

- Historical Context: Written in approximately A.D. 50, 1 Thessalonians 1:1 indicates that the book of 1 Thessalonians was written by the apostle Paul, probably along with Silas and Timothy. In the church of Thessalonica there were some misunderstandings about the return of Christ. Paul desired to clear them up in his letter. He also writes it as an instruction in holy living. The first three chapters are about Paul longing to visit the church in Thessalonica but not being able to because Satan stopped them (1 Thessalonians 2:18), and how Paul cared for them and was encouraged to hear how they had been. Paul then prays for them (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13). In chapter 4, Paul is instructing the believers in Thessalonica on how to live a holy life in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12). Paul goes on to instruct them regarding a misconception, telling them that the people who have died in Christ Jesus will also go to heaven when He comes back (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 5:1-11). The book ends with final instructions on living the Christian life, including the offering of thanksgiving to God.
- Grammatical Usage: “**Rejoice evermore**” in the Greek is “*chairete pantote*” positioned in the present progressive tense; “**pray**” or “*proseuchomai*” is always used of prayer to God (Deuteronomy 6:4: “*The LORD our God is one LORD*”; or “*The LORD is our God, the LORD is one*”; or “*The LORD is our God, the LORD alone*”) while the adverb “**ceasing**” or “*adialeptos*” does not carry the meaning of uninterrupted but rather an action which is constantly recurring;

“**thanks**” is “eucharisteite” and is an admonition to all believers to render thanks as it is God’s will – circumstances notwithstanding (cf. Rom. 8:28; 29).

- Literal Application: “Always be rejoicing at all times; <sup>17</sup>not neglecting your prayer life; <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”
- Contextual Interpretation: The age-old question frequently asked is: “How can I find God’s will for my life?” Paul says that we don’t need to worry about finding God’s will, we merely need to find God and then His will finds us. In these three verses are three commands which prove central and pivotal to the Christian – even in discovering God’s will:
  - **Be joyful (5:16).** This is one of approximately 70 New Testament commands to rejoice. This ought to remind us that choosing joy is a decision of the will. While happiness depends on what is happening around us, joy is independent of happenings. This means we must remember that nothing merely happens by chance (Pr. 16:33; Is. 46:9, 10). God is working out His sovereign plan in our lives (Eph. 1:11), therefore we must rejoice. This doesn’t mean life won’t hurt, but even in the midst of the hurts we can rejoice, because we know that God is at work and in control. Consistent rejoicing is only possible if we remember three principles:
    - First, we must remember who God is (1 Tim. 1:17). Nehemiah 8:10 states, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Joy has its roots in a deep thankfulness for *who* God is. If we focus on God’s character and attributes (e.g., sovereign, merciful, faithful, loving – see supplement), we will always have plenty of cause to rejoice.
    - Second, rejoicing is possible if we then begin to recall *what* God has done, is doing, and will do. We can especially rejoice in what God has given us in Christ (John 3:16). As we focus on our Lord, we will exude joy. Someone once said, “A coffee break is good; a prayer break is better; a praise break is best.” Can you rejoice in the Lord today?
    - Finally, we can also rejoice in what God is doing in and through other believers. Paul only uses the word “joy” one other time in 1 Thessalonians and he uses it of his own joy for the spiritual maturity of the Thessalonians (3:9; cf. 2:19-20). As we begin to keep our finger on the spiritual pulse of God’s kingdom program, we will observe that He is doing great things throughout our country and world. Even though you may not feel like God is at work in your life, can you take your eyes off of yourself and see how He is at work elsewhere? In reality, God is at work in all our lives. The key is our sensitivity toward God which begins and ends with praise and thanksgiving.
  - **Be prayerful (5:17).** Praying without ceasing means praying repeatedly and often. The idea of the present tense imperative is not that believers should pray every minute of the day, but that we should offer prayers to God repeatedly. We should make it our habit to be in the presence of God. The Greek adverb translated “without ceasing” (*adialeiptos*) is used outside of the New Testament of a hacking cough. Have you had a cold recently? Then you know what it’s like to cough spontaneously, right? There are times you just can’t stop yourself. The same ought to be true of prayer. We should be continuously offering up prayers to the Lord because we just can’t help ourselves. We often go through life in such a hurry and so overwhelmed by our problems that we think we don’t have time to pray. That sense of hurriedness can be spiritually devastating. Carl Jung said, “Hurry is not of the devil; it IS the

devil.” When you pray, you are forced to slow down. You are forced to shift the focus of your thoughts from yourself to God. You stop thinking of how impossible everything is for you, and you start thinking of how possible everything is for God. You stop thinking of how weak you are, and you start thinking of how powerful God is. If you’re a stay-at-home mom, this may mean that you pray when you’re getting ready in the morning, when you’re home-schooling your kids or driving them to school, when you’re cleaning the house or doing the dishes. If you’re a career man or woman, you can pray during your commute, when you stretch at your desk, during your lunch break, before you return home for the day. It is a fallacy that “practice makes perfect”; however it is true that *practice makes permanent*.

- **Be thankful (5:18).** The apostle Paul didn’t say to give thanks “for” all circumstances, but “in” all circumstances. All of life’s circumstances are not good, but there will always be something in those circumstances for which to give thanks. Paul uses the word “thanks” only one other time in 1 Thess 2:13, where he thanks God for the Thessalonians receiving the Word. This demonstrates that there are many things that we can be thankful for. What are you thankful for today? Will you express gratitude to God and others? Gratitude is likely the greatest evidence that you and I are filled with the Holy Spirit. God has blessed you and me, and He expects us to respond with hearts full of gratitude which serves the dual role of offering and testimony. We are called to both “be” and “do” - simultaneously and consistently.

These three verses *are* God’s will for you. Most of us want to know what God’s specific will is for our lives—who we’re supposed to marry, where we’re supposed to live, what job we should have. Yet God tends to give us freedom in these areas. But if He does want to reveal Himself more specifically to you, He isn’t about to do so until you first obey His general will (Dt. 5:29; 6:2-4; 6:24). His general will is that you be joyful, prayerful, and thankful. Do you want specific direction? Do you want to know the will of God? It is found in 5:16-18. Be joyful, prayerful, and grateful. If you’re not obeying these commands, you’re not walking in the Spirit. You’re out of the will of God, no matter how many gifts of the Spirit you might be exhibiting in your life. You may say, “Well, I don’t like that.” I don’t like it much either, but I didn’t say it. God said it. The Bible is not only a sword, it is a hammer (Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? – Jeremiah 23:29). Have you been hammered by the Word of God? Will you seek to obey these three commands so that God can reveal more of Himself to you?

- **Scriptural Comparison:** Because of what we have in Christ, believers have reason to rejoice even in the face of the many and varied trials of life. Maintaining a joyful spirit depends on our focus and faith in the Lord—His person, plan, principles, promises, and purposes as set forth in Scripture. This doesn’t mean life won’t hurt, but even in the midst of the hurts, we can rejoice because we know that God is at work and in control. Note the following:

**Some of the grounds for rejoicing as Christians are:** The Lord Himself (Phil. 3:1; 4:4), His incarnation (Luke 2:10), His power (Luke 12:17), His resurrection (Matt. 28:8; Luke 24:52), His presence with the Father (John 14:28), His presence with believers (John 16:22; 20:20), His ultimate triumph (John 8:56), the believer’s salvation (2 Cor. 8:2), enrollment in heaven (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3), liberty in Christ (Acts 15:31, cf. Gal. 5:1), hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:2), and his prospect of eternal rewards (Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:23).

**Some of the occasions for rejoicing for Christians are:** Hearing the gospel (Acts 13:48), receiving the Lord (Luke 19:6; Acts 8:39), suffering with Christ (Acts 5:41, cf. 1 Pet. 4:13), the preaching of the gospel (Phil. 1:18), suffering for the gospel (Phil. 2:17; Col. 1:24), the

conversion of sinners (Luke 15:7; Acts 15:3), the manifestation of grace (Acts 11:23), the godly walk of believers (Rom. 16:19; 2 Cor. 7:4; 3 John 3, 4), godly submission to admonition (2 Cor. 7:9), the godly order of an assembly (Col. 2:5), receiving support and fellowship (Phil. 4:10), the rejoicing of others (Rom. 12:15, 2 Cor. 7:13), hearing of the well-being of others (2 Cor. 7:16), hearing of the kindness of believers to one another (Phil. 7), honor due to others (1 Cor. 12:26), and the triumph of truth (1 Cor. 13:6).

Paul states the paradox succinctly in 2 Corinthians 6:10: "... sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (cf. 2 Cor 12:10). The Thessalonian Christians had already suffered with joy (1 Thes. 1:6), as had Paul himself (3:9). The challenge is for this joyful outlook to become constant ("always"). From a human perspective they had every reason not to be joyful—persecution from outsiders and friction among themselves. Yet, in Christ, they are to be more and more joyful.

**How important is it to express thankfulness:** "He appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, to make petition, to give thanks, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel..." – 1 Chronicles 16:4

- **We should always be expressing thankfulness.** Certain Levites were appointed to give continual praise and thanks to God. Praise and thanksgiving should be a regular part of our routine, not reserved only for celebrations. Praise God continually and you will find that you won't take His blessings for granted.
- **There are four significant aspects of thankfulness.** Four elements of true thanksgiving are found in vv. 4-36: 1) *remembering* what God has done; 2) *telling* others about it; 3) *showing* God's glory to others; 4) *offering* gifts of self, time and resources. If you are truly thankful, your life will show it.

"A Psalm. -- A Song for the sabbath-day. It is good to give thanks to Jehovah, And to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High, <sup>2</sup>To declare in the morning Thy kindness, And Thy faithfulness in the nights." – Psalm 92:1, 2

- **Thankfulness ought to be a major ingredient in all our relationships.** During the Thanksgiving holiday, we focus on our blessings and express our gratitude to God for them. But thanks should be on our lips every day. We can never say thank you enough to parents, friends, leaders and especially to God. When thanksgiving becomes an integral part of your life, you will find that your attitude toward life will change. You will become positive, gracious, loving and humble.

"...because, having known God they did not glorify [Him] as God, nor gave thanks, but were made vain in their reasonings, and their unintelligent heart was darkened..." – Romans 1:21

- **One of the first marks of rejecting God is forgetting to thank Him.** How could intelligent people turn to idolatry? Idolatry begins when people reject what they know about God. Instead of looking to Him as the Creator and Sustainer of life, they see themselves as the center of the universe. They soon invent "gods" that are convenient projections of their own selfish plans and decrees. These gods may be wooden figures or things we pursue such as money, power or comfort. They may even be misrepresentations of God Himself – making God in our image, instead of the reverse. The common denominator is this – idolaters worship the things God or man made, rather than God Himself. Is there anything you feel you can't live without? Is there any priority greater than God? Do you

have a dream you would sacrifice everything to realize? Does God take first place? Do you worship God or idols of your own making?

“You were saved by faith in God, who treats us with overwhelming kindness - much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own. <sup>9</sup>It isn't something you have earned, so there is nothing you can brag about.” – Ephesians 2:8-9

- **Thankfulness ought to be the prime characteristic in a Christian's life.** When someone gives you a gift, do you say, “That's very nice – now, how much do I owe you?” No, the appropriate response to a gift is, “Thank you.” Yet how often Christians, even after they have been given the gift of salvation, feel obligated to try to work their way to God. Because our salvation and even our faith are gifts of God, we should respond with gratitude, praise and joy which allows God to work through us!
- **Thankfulness can take on a variety of effective expressions.** We become Christians through God's unmerited grace, not as the result of any effort, ability, intelligent choice or act of service on our part. However, out of gratitude for this free gift, we will seek to help and serve others with kindness, love and gentleness. While no action or work we do can help us obtain salvation, God's intention is that our salvation will result in acts of service. We are not merely saved for our own benefit, but to serve Christ and build up the church (Eph 4:12).

The question is often sincerely asked if Christians should be participating in holidays recognized either culturally or by the government. Here are a few things to consider:

(A) Does the holiday in any way promote false doctrine or immorality (Galatians 5:19-23)?

(B) Can we thank God for what we observe on a holiday (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)?

(C) Will celebrating the holiday detract from your Christian testimony / witness (Philippians 2:15)?

- Conclusion: Nehemiah 8:10 states, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Joy has its roots in a deep thankfulness for *what* God has done, is doing, will do, and for *who* God is (sovereign, merciful, faithful, omnipotent, omniscience, omnipresent, loving, etc.). As such, joy takes the burden out of toilsome service and gives strength to endure. Joy is also a part of the fruit of the Spirit's control as described in Galatians 5:22. It is linked with love, peace, longsuffering, and kindness. In other words, the capacity to love people, be longsuffering and kind is directly related to inner joy. Thus, joy is needed always, expressed continually and ultimately directed to God whether in praise, thanksgiving or manifested in our actions and reactions one toward another.