

## I Thessalonians 5:11

I Thessalonians was written, in part, to answer some of the questions the new believers in Thessalonica had, including some about the return of Jesus. Chapter 4 ended with a discussion of Jesus' return. Paul went on to write that Jesus is coming **"like a thief in the night"** or at an hour which is least expected. Read I Thessalonians 5:11.

Our Christian living is impacted to a large degree on the realization that in time we will stand before God, either when our life here is over or when Jesus comes again and we will be responsible for the things we have done or left undone in this life.

How differently would one live today if yesterday God had appeared in the sky and declared, for all the world to know, that at 12:00 noon today He would return? Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica telling them that such a return is possible anytime, so therefore, they ought to live accordingly all the time.

Beginning in verse 16, we are told some practical implications of our commitment to Jesus. This begins a threefold challenge, that clearly comes through as a unit in the Greek, to **be joyful, to pray** and **to give thanks**. The verbs are all in the form of a command so are not an option to do if or when we feel like it. We would probably find these verses easier if Paul had said, **"Rejoice as much as possible, pray more often than you do, and try to be thankful more often."** He didn't give us those options. He commanded us to rejoice **always**, to pray **without ceasing** and to give thanks **in everything**. In addition to being in the form of a command, the verbs are also in the present tense, which in the Greek implies something that is not only going on now but is to continually go on. A paraphrase of verse 16 would be, **"I command you to be joyful not only today but all day, every day."** The other verses would be paraphrased in a similar way.

Verse 16 reads, **"Be joyful always"**. This is actually the shortest verse in the Bible. **Jesus wept** (John 11:35) is the shortest in the English translation, but in the Greek, I Thessalonians 5:16 is the shortest. (In the original, there were no chapters and verses so in a sense that bit of trivia is not all that significant.)

Being joyful is the 1<sup>st</sup> of practices that are to characterize a true believer. Christians are joyful people, or at least they should be. They should be joyful regardless of what circumstances they might be under, joyful in a way the world can never know because they have a joy that is found only in Jesus. Paul wrote about the Christian and joy at least 2 dozen times in his letters. Read **Philippians 4:4**.

It is important to remember that joy and happiness are not the same. Happiness can be dictated by circumstances while real joy has nothing to do with that. Notice something interesting. The shortest verse in the Greek Bible reads, **"Be joyful always."** The shortest verse in the English translation reads, **"Jesus wept."** Jesus wept but never lost the joy because of His relationship with the Father. As a child of the heavenly Father we are to go through life rejoicing or being filled with joy even when circumstance seem to dictate otherwise and even when our eyes are filled with tears.

Life is serious. Life makes serious demands and can be very difficult at times. In fact, it can be almost unbearable at times. Yet the Christian, almost in paradox to this, is to have continual joy. In I Thessalonians 5:16 we read that the joy we are to have is to be an **“always”** joy. The Christian life is to always be joyful and that joy is to come from inner spiritual resources that are so great that earthly circumstances cannot disturb or disrupt them. Read Galatians 5:22.

It is perfectly normal for people to have joy when everything is going well. But Paul speaks here of what might be termed “unnatural joy” because it is not dependent upon circumstances but rather upon the presence of the Holy Spirit within.

Scripture makes it very clear that joy and sorrow can exist together because sorrow is associated with happiness and joy with the peace of the Lord within that is independent of circumstance.

Jesus wept over the circumstances He saw about Him but He never lost His joy. Read Hebrews 5:7 tells us that as how Jesus approached the Cross, which was anything but a happy circumstance. See also Hebrews 12:12.

Acts 16 describes an incident in Paul’s life where he was unjustly arrested, beaten without a legal trial and thrown into prison. Do you think Paul walked into that prison and shouted, “Man, am I happy to be here. That beating sure was fun.” Of course, he didn’t. He hurt all over and had no idea what might come next but read verse 25. In the midst of their tribulations they could rejoice and praise God.

Read Romans 12:15. The church tends to want to re-write that to say, “Jump on those who are mourning and tell them that if they were real Christians they wouldn’t be mourning but rejoicing.”

Returning to Philippians 4:4, Paul gave the key to real joy when he noted that believers are to **“Rejoice in the Lord always.”** Real joy is found only in the Lord. We belong to the Lord and, therefore, we know that He is working all things out for our good. Ultimately, we will be blessed. Read Romans 5:3-5.

We can know joy when we think more about the Lord than our difficulties, when we think more about our spiritual riches in Jesus than we do about earthly poverty. Real joy is the conscious decision on the part of a Christian to focus on God and His provision rather than circumstances. From an earthly perspective, things may look ugly but from a heavenly perspective, nothing cannot be better.

As Christians, we have a choice that the world does not have. We can focus on the difficulties we are facing or we can focus on God and the provisions that are ours because of what Jesus did for us. Read Colossians 3:1-2.

Read Hebrews 10:34 on the attitude of the early church towards persecution. With our eyes, hearts and minds upon Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we can be filled with joy and rejoice regardless of what may come our way.

Verse 17 reads, **“Pray continually”** or as some have translated it, **“Pray without ceasing.”** This command springs from the same great source as having continual joy, namely a Christian is one whose heart, mind, and life, while lived in this world, is none the less held captive by Him who is all in all and who is coming again.

The Greek has several words for prayer. The word used here is comprehensive, carrying the idea of an all-inclusive fellowship with God. Prayer is the realization of the presence of our heavenly Father in everything and at all times.

While it is impossible to be always uttering the words of prayer, it is possible, and very necessary, to always be in the spirit of prayer, which is the spirit of fellowship with God. It is a spirit of continual dependence upon God, a consciousness of His presence and a consciousness of His desire to richly bless us.

I would suggest a habit worth cultivating. Cultivate the habit of 1-7 word prayers that can be offered silently throughout the day. When you shop, as you pay your bill silently say, “thanks for providing.” Pray also “Thanks for a safe trip” or “Encourage the family in the booth next to me” or “Thanks for being with my kids today.” or “Bring healing to my friend.” You don’t even have to add “in Jesus name” to those short prayers because He knows they are.

Then verse 17 tells us to give thanks in all circumstances. This command, like the others, is dependent upon our inner relationship with God from whom every gift has come. The natural man looks at his blessings and saying, “See what I have gained.” The spiritual man looks upon his blessings and declares, “Thanks be to God who in grace has bestowed so much.” The natural man looks at what he does not have and grumbles and complains. The man of God looks at what he has and knows that it is sufficient to accomplish whatever God has designated for his life. Remember, it is **“in everything”** and not **“for everything.”** Neither joy nor thanksgiving flow from circumstances. We should continually thank God for our salvation, for our lives in Jesus and for the blessings that flow from above. We can and must learn to be continually in the spirit of thanksgiving.

Why should joy, prayer and thanksgiving be priorities in our lives? Paul’s answer very simply is, **“It is the will of God for us in Christ.”**