

Prayers

To God

You have taken my life by storm, Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God! I would not have known love had I not turned to look into your eyes! I would not have found truth had I not yielded to Your teaching! I would not have found healing unless I responded to Your touch! And my life is a journey with so much to discover! Hallelujah!

For myself

Pray to confess those things in your life that give you cause for concern; things you know upset your soul or upset those around you, or perhaps those habits that too often dominate the time you spend on things.

For others

Pray for those who have no adequate water. Use the internet to find out information about countries such as Mali and other Saharan countries in need of investment in their water supply. Pray accordingly.

Meditation

Stay beside me, Lord, I pray. You have given me every blessing.

Lord of direction, go with me wherever I go;
Lord of protection, surround me with Your love;
Lord of purity, clean the pollution in my mind;
Lord of security, protect my family from all evil;
Lord of justice, open my eyes to perils all around;
Lord of wholeness, invigorate me when I rest;
Lord of faithfulness, show me Yourself in others;
Lord of authority, guide the decisions I make;
Lord of creation, restore me even while I sleep;

Be with me every day, when I awake, so I may abide with You forever.

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

- ¹⁶ Rejoice always,
- ¹⁷ pray constantly,
- ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances;

for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

- ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit,
- ²⁰ do not despise prophecies,
- ²¹ put everything to the test,
- take hold of what is good,
- ²² keep your distance from everything that appears evil.

Review

Yesterday, we began to read the final verses of Thessalonians which contain a marvellous collection of brief sayings, each of which has much to say to us about our discipleship. Depending on how you count them, there are eight sayings in today's passage. All of them are well known, and you may well hear people quote from it from time to time.

Dealing with a counsel of perfection!

The trouble with these sayings is that although easy to say they are difficult to achieve. The very first one, '*rejoice always*' may sound wonderful on the lips of someone who is full of praise to God, but close by may be a person who has suffered much and who does not feel what they have endured is worth 'rejoicing' about. So is such happiness a permanently achievable state in Christ and indicator of spiritual excellence?

We have moved some way from what Paul is trying to say here. Like every preacher, he wants to encourage his readers in the midst of their troubles (see previously in chapter 1), so he suggests these spiritual goals because he knows that they are fruit of the Spirit's work in the soul. Nevertheless, what does this mean in practice? The New Testament records plenty of occasions where Paul is not exactly happy - his story in Acts records his anger and upset as well as his joy and happiness. However, his testimony is that by keeping positive in spirit he is able both to maintain his witness and handle the pressure and dangers before him (e.g. 2 Cor. 11:15-23). His letters bear witness to his persistent rejoicing (5:16), prayer (5:17), thanksgiving (5:18), spiritual fervour (5:19), acceptance of spiritual gifts (5:20), supreme wisdom (5:21) and avoidance of all evil (5:22), and this is the reason why his works are now a part of Scripture. Such qualities should inspire us.

'rejoice always'

The first three comments go together before the phrase in verse 8 '*for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus*'. So Paul certainly felt that the Christian should always have a reason to rejoice, whether or not he or she might feel it or be in a place to express it. To conform to the 'will of God' does not mean ignoring the difficulties of life, but it does mean keeping in touch with the privilege of Christian faith, which is the joy of salvation. We can hardly say this is the most important thing in life if we ditch our joy whenever life throws troubles at us.

'Pray constantly'

The second comment is rather like the first. If we stop what we are doing and pray all the time then we have allowed the literal meaning of this to dominate reality and have failed to understand the power of this advice. Prayer is spiritual communication with our Lord, on many different planes than just speaking or kneeling down to run through a list of things we want to bring to God. Rather, if Jesus is our constant spiritual companion then the whole of life may be classed as prayer! So Paul's advice is not a matter of stopping what we do to say our prayers, but being conscious of Jesus' presence with us all the time, and remaining in fellowship with Him. As previous generations might say, 'He abides in us and we abide in Him'.

'give thanks in all circumstances'

Yet again, some say that this, the third piece of advice is impossible because life is full of experiences which cannot be avoided and for which we would not give thanks. It would be unfortunate if we viewed life like this however because this is a profoundly worldly way of looking at things. In the midst of trouble, as Paul reminds us, God can *'work together for good'* in such a way as to bring good things out of supreme disaster (Romans 8:28). Paul does not blindly bid us to be thankful for all life's circumstances, but to be thankful within them. However painful life may be, our focus on the Lord will enable us to overcome the most dreadful things and the most testing of times.

'Do not quench the Spirit'

We may think it easy to understand the basic meaning of, *'Do not quench the Spirit'*. What may not be clear to us is that it is something of an all-embracing phrase, because the Greek is rather unclear at this point as to whether the phrase refers to the human spirit or God's Spirit! There is no use trying to resolve this because there is not technical method of resolving the matter! So we may as well accept that the phrase can mean both; we should neither stand in the way of what God wishes to do with us by His Spirit, nor quash our own spirits or the spirits of others by placing limits on what we think God either can do with us or wishes to do with us. It is liberating to think of this advice in this way!

'do not despise prophecies'

Paul says this because he knew that the work of the Old Testament prophets was despised and this paved the way for the Jewish rejection of Christ. He also knew that if prophecy was despised in the church, people would lose track of the means whereby the Lord revealed what He was doing to His people. Now this may appear an obscure piece of advice, but it is profoundly important. The prophet is one who communicates God's Word, and frankly, this is what a preacher does when he or she stands in a pulpit to preach. Indeed, I strongly suggest we need a revival amongst preachers realising that this is indeed what they are doing! Whether it is called prophecy or preaching, it is not to be despised.

'put everything to the test'

The next phrase is important because it defines how 'prophecy' is received, and as I have just pointed out, how preaching should be received in the church as well. *'Put everything to the test'* is the vital work of discernment which the church must do to determine whether something is truly of God; the church must never accept a prophecy because someone says so or because they claim a gift. Biblical tradition requires that in the most general sense, the words of a prophet be found *'truthful'* (Deut 18:20-22). In addition, we should 'test' any prophecy against all the revelations of God's Word, from the Bible, to other prophecies of our own day (1 John 4:1f.).

'take what is good'

This is a straightforward piece of advice, but it is unfortunately easy to ignore; indeed, we get into trouble most easily when we assume we have a grasp of what is true and right but discover in a crisis that we do not. Having a grasp of the things of God is a matter of knowing them and applying them, and it doesn't happen by default! The best response we can make to this advice from Paul is make sure that we pursue what is good with an enquiring mind, notwithstanding the advice that comes next!

'keep your distance from ... evil'

Again, this seems obvious, but we fall on too many occasions because we have failed to exercise discernment. Evil has the ability to hover around us if we do not both recognise its presence and do all in our power to dismiss it; it is like swatting a fly, it may be annoying to

have to fight the fly and keep it at bay, but rather this than allow it to settle on either us or our food and spread its germs!

There is so much more that could be said about each of these pieces of practical and spiritual advice, but we should always start by clarifying our understand of what we might be called the 'plain meaning' of each phrase. Then, with spiritual insight, try to understand how this can apply to our spiritual and practical lives so that we reflect the glory of God in all we do.

Application

Tough advice

It may be hard to imagine how the Christian life can be as happy and glorious as this text appears to presuppose, and I have certainly lived for periods of time when my life was in the balance and there was no real way of connecting with the world of being cheerful and encouraging. Yet others ministered these things to me, and perhaps we should remember this. If we are willing to be people who aim to be this inspirational and godly, then our help will enable others to be over-comers of trouble and distress, and this is a clear ministry. Certainly, Paul sought to overcome the troubles of the people at Thessalonica in this letter, and he finished it with this advice; he was encouraging these people as he wrote these words

Real Christian life

I have always loved this text, possibly because someone took time to explain to me roughly what I have said here. Once freed from the sense of personal inadequacy that can come from feeling unable to be happy all the time, the whole passage becomes an exposition of the true Christian life. I recall that over the years I have met a large number of people who have been an amazing and a powerful witness to me of godliness; they have all demonstrated some if not all these properties. Many years ago I met a godly man who had constant pain from shingles, and he told me that he was constantly thankful to God for his life despite his pain. His testimony helps me to this day.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Take time to reflect on these powerful pieces of advice, which of them means most to you and why?
2. Discuss whether it is possible to 'rejoice always' (etc.) in the context of real life, without compromising our humanity.
3. Discuss how prophecy might be 'put to the test' in order to ensure that it is the 'Word of God'.

Final Prayer

Almighty Father, give us humility, in the face of the great truths of the Gospel. May we handle them with dignity and care, and always remember that we are dependent upon You for everything, including our wisdom and understanding. Guide us into all truth, Almighty Father; AMEN