

## Difficult Orders for Suffering People

Call to Worship: Psalm 148

Hymn #226- *Rejoice, the Lord is King*

1st Scripture: Philippians 4:10-13

Hymn Insert- *Speak O Lord*

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Hymn #476- *Rise, My Soul, to Watch and Pray*

### **Introduction:**

We continue to work through a list of various additional exhortations, which Paul has attached to this letter to the Thessalonians, before working through the conclusion of the letter in verses 23-28.

And this morning, we come to a three-fold exhortation, which is followed by a motivation unto fulfilling these commands.

### **I. Contextual Preface**

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Now, one might wonder why Paul would have to command such things as to "rejoice" and "give thanks." And why would he have to add the compelling motive of recognizing that this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus? Such things would seem beyond desirable for the Christian, wouldn't they? You wouldn't have to command a child to play with their new Christmas toys or to eat their birthday ice cream cake, would you? So, why does Paul put these exhortations in the form of an imperative command, backed by a sobering reminder of these practices being God's will for us? Maybe the "praying without ceasing," but the rejoicing and giving of thanks? Seems a bit odd, doesn't it?

Well, before we consider these exhortations individually, let me preface these considerations with two important facts:

1) Keep the context in mind here. Remember, the Thessalonians have been facing ongoing and very difficult persecutions, from the time they were first birthed through Paul, as a church. They have not had a break, and they won't get one for the foreseeable future (they were still being persecuted when 2 Thessalonians was written). And so, they have not had the luxury of living comfortably, without the threat of opposition, for as long as they have known Christ.

Indeed, their commitment to Christ has brought them much conflict that they had not known when they were unregenerate. And some of their loved ones have died, more than likely as a consequence of this persecution. [Read 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14-16; 2 Thess. 1:3-4]

And so, rejoicing and giving thanks in this particular (ongoing) context, can be a very difficult thing to do. In fact, without a proper understanding of the context (without a God's-eye view of their suffering), commanding such a people to rejoice and give thanks (under these circumstances) can be like adding salt to their raw wounds. Indeed, it is a difficult thing to rejoice and be thankful, when enduring present, ongoing affliction with no foreseeable end in view.

2) By way of preface, notice the quantitative emphasis that Paul adds to these commands. It were enough, if he simply stated, "rejoice, pray and give thanks." But notice, Paul adds a superlative emphasis to each of these exhortations. Not simply rejoice, but "rejoice *always*." Not simply pray, but "pray *without ceasing*." And not simply give thanks, but "*in everything* give thanks." You see, Paul straps on a *no-limit* emphasis to each of these exhortations. And the ongoing emphasis of these exhortations, inevitably carries the people of God into the context of suffering, to which the Thessalonians were no strangers...often.

And so, understanding the context here, and recognizing the quantitative extent of these exhortations, we can now appreciate why Paul issues these in the form of a command, backed by an essential motivation. Having worked through this preface then, let us move on to examine each of these exhortations individually, before pondering Paul's conclusive motive.

## **II. Rejoice Always**

Coming from an often persecuted Apostle Paul, written to an often persecuted Thessalonian church, and preserved by the Holy Spirit for the universal church, which in all ages, would have to endure the onslaughts of the world, the flesh and the devil, this seems like a tall order to fill, doesn't it? How does one strive to rejoice always in a fallen context, where we are surrounded by so many sorrows, on many different levels (personal, familial, national...etc)? Well brethren, as one who can testify to the fact that there are many times that I have fallen short

in this regard, but as one who can honestly say that I strive to this end, let me answer this in the only way in which it can be answered. One of the Scripture memory texts puts it this way:

"...looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

Having this text in mind, let us rephrase the question, come up with a solution, and then move from the greater to the lesser in applying that solution. What greater world of sorrow could a man bear than to anticipate bearing the sins of all of His people, and becoming the object of God's undiluted wrath while bearing those sins? What greater burden of agony can the soul embrace than the agony of becoming a curse and enduring the full measure of hellish wrath on behalf of others? And yet, Jesus had anticipated that very thing from birth, and began to feel that weight when He set His face like a flint to head to Jerusalem for the last time.

And who could forget the Garden of Gethsemane, on the surface of the Mount of Olives when the Christ was Himself crushed like an olive in the press, sweating drops of blood, as He anticipated the imminent suffering of the cross. Indeed, Angels came and ministered to Him, else He would have died right there in the garden, never making it to the cross even. And of course, who can begin to fathom the experience of the cross itself, where the sun hid its face and the powers of darkness tormented our Lord, and the express wrath of God met our Lord without relent, to the extent that all our Lord could do, under that incomprehensible weight of judgment was cry aloud, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?," a question that was an expression of agony, because He already knew very well the answer to it.

What enabled our Lord to endure all of that; indeed, a package consisting of the worst of sorrows (sorrows, which none of God's children will ever know firsthand)? The Author of Hebrews tells us that it was "the *joy* that was set before Him," which led Him to endure the cross and despise the shame. What joy? The joy of presenting a redeemed people to His Father, wholly cleansed and wholly sanctified by His very cross! His gaze into the future, led Him through the present worst of turmoils!

And brethren, our joy must be drawn from the same source. We continually look to and personalize what Christ accomplished at that cross...for you and for me! We recall the utter

death that once consumed us and ponder, that God, in Christ, reached into our graves and raised us up unto a new life in Christ! We are born again, brethren! We love and we see and we know all that is summed up in the Way, the Truth and the Life, our blessed Savior Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us! And we ponder that the only thing that presently separates us from visibly beholding Him now, is the very veil of tears, which carries our present sorrows. But this is not the end! This is only a stitch in time; indeed a dust fragment soon to be blown off of an eternity of eternities with Christ, where there are pleasures forevermore, with these former sorrows to have been passed away forever! This is the joy, from which we constantly draw. It is the oxygen tank, which we constantly bear in our souls, as we plunge the depths of this temporal life, seeking to rescue more lost souls and to continue to raise a flag for the glory of Christ! From there, we can strive to rejoice always, can we not, brethren, even while bearing present griefs and sorrows at the same time?

### **III. Pray Without Ceasing**

In the second portion of this exhortation, the Apostle charges the Thessalonians to pray without ceasing. Now, when he says this, we are not to suppose that the Apostle literally means to live every single moment of your life in constant prayer. That would be an impossible task and we would not be able to fulfill all of our life responsibilities, let alone the many other spiritual responsibilities that are given to us in the Scriptures.

That said, brethren, Paul adds "without ceasing" for a reason, doesn't he? And obviously, therefore, he means "Pray much, pray continually, pray often and let there not be great intervals of time, which separate your visits to the throne room of God." You see, we don't want to go to the other extreme, and cheapen what Paul says here, simply because he cannot literally mean, "Live one non-stop prayer session with God." We are to be a people of prayer then, brethren. And least of all, we can most certainly never say that we pray too much. In fact, probably for most of us (including myself), setting apart sufficient time to pray each day is one of the most difficult disciplines in all of the Christian life. And yet, it is that important. Paul calls us to pray without ceasing for a reason.

You see, Paul assumes many things when he gives this command. He assumes:

1) That the battle in front of us is a battle that we cannot possibly win on our own. The enemy is far too strong for us. We are no match for the world, the flesh and the devil. But Christ is! And if we are to win this battle, then we must ever be pleading for God to grant us His Holy Spirit, so that we might have the wisdom, strength, grace and power to overcome, and to persevere to the end. Less the Holy Spirit, at any given moment, the Thessalonians would fold like a book before their persecutors. They would deny Christ and go astray. And brethren, we may not realize it, but there are many, many, pitfalls and obstacles, which are constantly set before us. And apart from the Holy Spirit, we would hit every last one of them. But, our Lord taught us that the Father gladly gives the Holy Spirit, to all who sincerely ask for Him.

2) Prayer keeps us humble. It brings us back to reality, lest we forget that every spiritual blessing, and every good gift comes not from ourselves, but from God. Prayer is for our good, in that, it brings back the Creature/Creator reality to the forefront of our souls, so that we never forget that apart from Christ, we can do nothing!

3) Prayer is a blessed means of expressing our heartfelt love, worship and appreciation to God in Christ. It is a New Covenant means of offering peace and free will offerings to our God, as an expression of gratefulness to Him for all that He has done.

Brethren, we can go on and on, and speak of the innumerable, essential purposes of prayer (intercession, confession of sin...etc), but all in all, let us suffice to say that it is a most critical and necessary weapon for the warring Christian, who supposes to make it home to glory! I would only simply further add, as a motivation to come to the prayer meetings, that this command is given to the church as a body, and not merely to the individuals that make up the body. In other words, while Paul would certainly have our private prayer lives in mind, he also, most certainly has the corporate prayer life of the body in mind. And this is consistent with what we see happening in the life of the church in the Book of Acts. And so, it would not be wrong at all, to take from this exhortation, the idea of "pray *together* without ceasing," as well.

#### **IV. In Everything Give Thanks**

Rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, and finally, *in everything* give thanks. Again, within a context of ongoing suffering, this can be hard, unless we constantly bring ourselves to

see the big picture of what God has done, what He is doing, and what He will do. These big picture realities, enable us to pull back from our present circumstances (to come up for a moment of breath, as it were) to give God what is rightfully His...thanks and praise!

1) What has God done? He has chosen to redeem and rescue us from our sins, from before the foundation of the world, and from out of a world that is naturally condemned and eternally damned in Adam. And He has done this in the Person of His Son, who took on flesh, passed through the birth canal of a woman, and conquered sin for us, in the crushing and cursing of His own body. And nothing can ever change that! Every present circumstance is less than dust on the scale of eternity, not even worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed in us. And so, we give God thanks, even in present sorrows and miseries, for this unchangeable reality, granted us before time, in Christ!

2) What is God doing? Even the present sufferings; every last scratch (not one infliction to be wasted), serves the purpose of forming more of Christ in us. Is it painful? Very! But it is short term, and the greater weight of glory to come is well, well worth it. All of these sufferings are temporal, limited to this life, and with a specific fine tuning purpose of increasing our faith in God, and forming more of Christ in us. It takes significant burning to bring the dross up out of the silver, but the final product is sweet and pure! And what God accomplishes here, will never have to be accomplished again in glory! The whole reality of pain and sorrow and suffering are completely nonexistent in the life to come. And so, in everything we give thanks, because nothing is wasted in God's complete plan of redemption.

3) What God will do? He will complete and finish the good work that He has begun in us, and He will bring us safely home to glory, where we will see Christ as He is, and we will be like Him. And there will be unending joy, the highest and fullest degree of elation, beyond even our greatest imagination here....and that, without end! No moment of sorrow or doubt or fear or misery...every moment there, being a moment where our capacity for joy is ever full and overflowing! And so, in anticipation of that guaranteed and most certain end in Christ, we give thanks now. In everything, we give thanks to God, for His indescribable gift of and in Christ to us!

## **V. The Motivation**

Finally, brethren, having commanded the Thessalonians (and us) to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing and in everything to give thanks, Paul adds an additional motivation to drive us toward these ends:

"For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." So often, we will find ourselves praying, "O Lord, if it be Your will," and "O Lord, let your will be done, for you are worthy." Well, here Paul gives us one part of God's glorious will for us in Christ. In our union with Christ; in our having been brought out of the world, out of condemnation and out of darkness, and into a blessed, real union with Christ, we find that God has a will and purpose for us (His people) there, as a new creation in Christ. And part of that will (this is by no means an exhaustive list here, but part of that will) is to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing and in everything to give thanks. How often people speak of the will of God, as if it were some hidden and undisclosed thing; some abstract reality, when the Scriptures give us everything that we need to know, concerning the divine will for us.

In short, brethren, God is glorified when we rejoice in Him and His blessings, when we seek Him in prayer, and when we give Him thanks. You see, all of these are expressions of our faith, hope and confidence in our great God, amidst a world that denies Him, if not in word, than certainly in action. Every unbeliever; every non-Christian is a practical atheist at best, and an idolater at heart. And so, Peter tells a suffering people in 1 Peter 1:3-9:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls."

Now, brethren, in closing consider these facts:

1) God takes such an interest in us (in you), His people, that it is His will that we rejoice always in Christ, that we pray without ceasing (speak to Him always) in Christ, and that we give Him praise and thanks in Christ. He is not some distant entity that is too big to care for even dust. And furthermore, the Scriptures teach us that it is His delight and joy to give us the kingdom; a kingdom that brings us into close, eternal fellowship with Him! He delights in us, brethren! He delights in your joy, and that without regret (with no restraint on His part)! We deserve nothing but hell, but He has given us His Son, and He wants us to rejoice always in Him!

2) He bids us to pray without ceasing, because we have direct access to the innermost sanctuary of His glorious, heavenly temple. Why would we not want to pray more and more and more, alone and with the brethren? What should stop us? The veil has been torn in two, from top to bottom, in Christ! We can have boldness and confidence to enter into the very presence of God, and He bids us to do so. Imperfect as we are, He bids us to come in Christ!

3) And it is His will that in everything we give thanks. That's not always easy, but with the big picture in mind, of God's sovereign direction of the past, present, and future, we do so. And even when our feelings betray us, we cling to what we know to be true and we give thanks to our Creator, our Lord and our Savior! Our subjective emotions must be brought into subjection to the objective truth of who God is, His Word, and His unchanging promises!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25