

Joy to the World

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

The letter we call first Thessalonians is probably the earliest and oldest document in the New Testament. It was written by Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus, probably the most influential force in the development of Christianity after Jesus.

Paul tells the Thessalonians (5: 16), "Rejoice always!" Be joyful! Be full of joy! Joy, it seems, was pretty important to Paul and so it may be pretty important to us also.

What is joy? What meaning does that word hold for you? How do you feel about joy? C. S. Lewis defined joy as a quality of experience "of unsatisfied desire [that is] more desirable than any other satisfaction." That makes joy not quite the same thing as feeling happy. Joy is a "unsatisfied desire," yet something desirous of being pursued. Trying to grasp or hold onto happiness inevitably sees it slip through your fingers.

Joy is also not quite the same thing as pleasure, though they have much in common. Seeking pleasure as a goal leads only to self-absorption and a diminishing sense of both happiness and pleasure. Joy is a product of many things: sometimes the result of what we do and sometimes of what we don't do. The experience of joy is strongly connected to the passionate pursuit of a dream.

Paul tells us to rejoice, so joy seems to be a matter of choice -- of will and intent. Can you, without being naïve or judgmental, choose to be joyful? How do you do that? I'm suggesting joy is both a choice and a product of choices. Not all choices are conscious ones.

Paul's pastoral letter to the Thessalonians was written in a period of great anxiety. Both Paul and his young church lived in fear of persecution. They also lived in expectation of the second coming of Christ. He describes for them what a life reflecting Christ's presence and following Jesus' example looks like.

"Rejoice always!" Paul admonition is to choose joy. He urges us to seek joy and to fill our time with what is meaningful. Fill your life with what is "passion-full" for you. And keep choosing joy. Keep filling your life with the quality of experience that is "joy".

Let go of whatever keeps you from truth in your life. Release whatever diverts you from what is authentic in yourself. This is not same as whatever is easy or necessarily pleasant.

There is a big problem that lots of people run into trying to seek joy. Sometimes, they try putting on a mask of happiness to fool others and maybe themselves. That can lead to projecting a false self and set up an unhealthy tension that leads to depression. At other times, however, taking on the image of joy can help lead to joy.

What does it mean to be full of joy? Paul offers several suggestions. What do you think of them? In addition to rejoicing, he suggests *prayer without ceasing*. Cultivate the sense or awareness of God's presence by practicing that awareness – by praying. Hold in your mind and heart the image or idea that God is at the center of all your thoughts and all your desires.

Another suggestion is to *give thanks in all circumstances*. Live a life characterized by gratitude. I don't think Paul means to be naïve necessarily. He certainly does not mean to portray a false gratitude. Find the genuine thanks that is present in virtually every situation. Do the hard work it takes to distinguish for what to be thankful and to whom to be thankful.

Do not quench the Spirit. How might we quench the Spirit? How do we get in the way of being in Spirit and the Spirit being in us? There is a lot we don't know for sure about Paul's life. One clear thing is that Paul had a life-changing experience of the living Christ, of the Holy Spirit, that changed his life. That experience on the road to Damascus became the basis of his whole ministry. Throughout the rest of his life, there was an unquenchable Spirit in him. Certainly, this is what Paul meant by saying, "Do not quench the Spirit" that is in you. He is encouraging each of us, and all of us together, to trust the experience of the holy we have in our lives.

Do not despise the words of prophets. I don't think Paul means just the Old Testament prophets of Israel. The Christian life is often strengthened by the critique of others and of self. It is a valuable process that leads us to discover both our authentic self and also to be open to new pathways for our lives.

Test everything. God gives us each a brain. Learn to use it. He is not talking about being an intellectual, but about thinking and discerning. Test everything from the Bible to what your pastor tells you by the light of your own experience. Test everything from parental wisdom to the claims of commercials by their existential validity (if they work).

After you test everything, hold fast to what is good. Look in your own heart of hearts, into your deepest, most honest place. What do you know is true? What do you know is good? Grasp that and hold onto it with the tenacity of a bulldog.

As you hold fast to what is good, also abstain from every form of evil. I take this evil to be whatever is destructive to yourself and destructive to others. It is whatever counters or obstructs the goal of justice and peace for society and for the world.

The word for today is joy. Why is it important? It's important because of its relationship to peace. Joy is a means to peace. Peace is a prerequisite to joy. Peace is our true hope. It is the promise of Christmas.

The promise of Christmas is peace. Angels announce the coming of the Christ child singing, "Peace on earth, good will to all people". What can we do to claim that promise?

In the belief that peace will never come to our world until peace comes in our hearts, I offer some advice of my own – ten steps to peace. I suggested them last Christmas and believe they are still valid this year:

1. Be joyful! Seek joy. Fill your time with what is meaningful and "passion-full" for you.
2. Keep choosing joy. Keep filling your life with the quality of experience that is "joy" and let go of what keeps you from truth in life and from what is authentic in yourself.
3. Be gentle. Be approachable and easy to touch physically, emotionally, intellectually, and interpersonally. A gentle person listens and desires to hear you. So, be gentle in the presence of others. Be gentle within yourself, too -- not harsh, not judgmental.
4. Be near to God as God is near to you. Be present to God's presence. Be focused and not scattered in your thoughts and desires. Learn the blessing of "it is enough."
5. Be mindful. Stay in the present moment, not living in the future (worry) or in the past (guilt). Take care that your dreams and hopes don't take you out of the present moment. Develop gentle disciplines to nourish yourself.

6. Be faithful. Be consistent and try not to second guess yourself. Trust the pathway you are walking even as you trust the changes you make. Be faithful to the truth you know at the core of your being
7. Be thankful.” Give thanks that all of life is connected. Give thanks that God is present in every other person and in you. God is present in the best and worst of all situations and all institutions. God’s gift of joy is present in feelings of happiness and of sadness, even in feelings of ambivalence. Joy is God’s gift in every circumstance. We can be thankful for the joy, even if not for the circumstance.
8. Be specific” in prayer. This starts with learning to know what you really want; then learning to want what you want. Then, pray specifically and watch specifically for “answers.”
9. Be genuine. Only the clear vision of God sees to the authentic heart and motives of a person. Only the Spirit of God enables us to know ourselves, Remember that the truth of God is a poet’s truth:
In each heart lies a Bethlehem, an inn where we must ultimately answer whether there is room or not. (*Kneeling in Bethlehem* by Ann Weems)
10. Be at peace. The gift promised is given. In each life, in each circumstance, the blessed gift of peace waits to be received and opened.

Peace is the biblical concept of *shalom*, much more than the cessation of hostility or the absence of war. *Shalom* is wholeness and a connectedness to all of life, to the source of life. Peace means living with a sense of joy, living in joy, in that quality of experience "of unsatisfied desire [that is] more desirable than any other satisfaction." Angels are bending near the earth. Hear their song as it sounds in your own heart: "Peace on earth goodwill to all"

Isaac Watts was an English contemporary of Bach and Handel. He was perhaps the greatest writer of hymns in the history of the English language, including "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross". All of Watts' hymn were rhymed forms of Psalms (called Psalters). Watts composed a beloved Christmas carol based on Psalm 98 -- "Make a joyful noise to the Lord...." These words were later set music by George Frederick Handel

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
 Let earth receive her King;
 Let every heart prepare Him room,
 And Heaven and nature sing,
 Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
 Let men their songs employ;
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
 Repeat the sounding joy,
 No more let sins and sorrows grow,
 Nor thorns infest the ground;
 He comes to make His blessings flow
 Far as the curse is found,
 He rules the world with truth and grace,
 And makes the nations prove
 The glories of His righteousness,
 And wonders of His love

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24 (NRSV)

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil. ²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Isaiah 61: 1-2a; 10 (The Message)

¹The Spirit of GOD, the Master, is on me
because GOD anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives,
pardon all prisoners.
²GOD sent me to announce the year of his grace--
¹⁰I will sing for joy in GOD,
explode in praise from deep in my soul!
He dressed me up in a suit of salvation,
he outfitted me in a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom who puts on a tuxedo
and a bride a jeweled tiara.