

All I want for Christmas is...my two front teeth...a laptop...a Golden Retriever...a power saw...to see my family... to feel like I am 30 again, to have a spouse that is in good shape so we could do some things again, to find a Christian spouse and remarry. How would you finish that sentence? If I gave you ten seconds right now, I'm sure you could come up with something on your Christmas wish-list. You may know what you want for Christmas but have you ever considered what God wants? The Apostle Paul tells us in our sermon text when he wrote to Christians living in the Greek city of Thessalonica: Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks under all circumstances, don't put out the Spirit's Fire, do not treat prophecies with contempt, test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid evil.

What does God want to see in me this Christmas? He wants to see genuine optimism. Upbeat Spirit! Mr. or Ms. Positive. "Learn The Secret of Being An Eternal Optimist!" You have got to be kidding pastor. I am hearing talk about the packing of the Supreme Court. The Green New Deal. Government Run Health Care. Higher taxes. And I am still living in the Covid Cave. And the thing is God wants us to be joyful always, not just at Christmas. He wants us to give thanks in all circumstances – even in the difficult ones. But how am I supposed to give thanks when the doctors can't figure out why I keep getting headaches? How am I supposed to give thanks when I have to take care of my spouse 24/7? How am I supposed to give thanks when I walk this journey all by myself? Perhaps the poet, James Lowell, was right when he said, "An optimist is a guy who has never had much experience."

But Lowell never met the Apostle Paul. Paul had been beaten, imprisoned, and shipwrecked and yet he continued to rejoice and give thanks to God in every situation. Think of what he was doing when he had been jailed in Philippi. He and his sidekick Silas sang hymns to God! (Acts 16) Is that what you would do if you had been falsely arrested – lead your cellmates in a rousing rendition of "Amazing Grace"? Wouldn't you, instead, protest your innocence and angrily demand a lawyer?

Why was Paul such an optimist? Why did he encourage the persecuted Thessalonians and now us to be optimists...because no one likes a crybaby? That may be true but Paul gives us a better reason than that for genuine optimism in every situation. He starts off: Be joyful always!

That truth is illustrated in an interesting way in Psalm 84. In the middle of that psalm we read: "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. 6 As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. 7 They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion" (Psalm 84:5-7). The psalmist is describing believers in Old Testament times making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where they were intent on worshipping God. Their journey, however, took them through the wilderness and it wasn't easy. That's not unlike our lives in this sin-filled world. It often feels like we're just going from one crisis to the next and hanging on by our fingernails and getting weaker and more tired by the minute. But such is not the case. The psalmist says that believers "go from strength to strength" until they finally appear before God (Psalm 84:7). How can this be? Well, think of what happens when you're in the midst of a crisis. When your best efforts have failed to remedy the situation where do you turn? You turn to God in prayer, don't you? You also turn to God's Word for comfort. Whenever we take time to be in God's Word our faith is strengthened and our burden suddenly becomes lighter because we've been reminded that God is carrying it for us, and is also carrying us through the crisis. Like a car stopping to fill up

at a gas station, life's crises are God-given opportunities to pause and fill up our faith so that we drive away stronger, not weaker. Why can you be a genuine optimist? Because "in Christ" believers go from strength to strength on their drive to heaven.

Happiness is dependent upon our circumstances, while joy is an attitude. The Thessalonians weren't really happy about being picked on and persecuted. They weren't particularly happy about being poor. But they had reason for an attitude of joy. Why? Because believers know that Christ rules the heaven and earth, and so the sorrow which enters our lives is not a matter of blind fate. Anything which causes us sorrow is something our Savior permitted to come only to serve our good. Sorrows draw us closer to him. They purify our faith like gold is refined by fire. They provide opportunities for us to confess before others the hope that is in us. There is however, one thing sorrow cannot do. It can never, never separate us from God's love. In addition, God's Spirit helps us and prays for us in our weakness. And we know that God will keep his promises to watch over us and care for us in our sorrows. So Be joyful always! When we focus on what we are in Christ, what we have in Christ, and what we will be because of Christ, we can "**be joyful always**" – even in the midst of stressful and unhappy circumstances. Life events change, but "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8). And He is our joy and delight.

Another reason we have for being genuine optimists is because Paul says that it's God's will that we pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Of course Satan wants us to think of this as a burden – like a mom telling her teenage son to text his whereabouts every thirty minutes. No, this is like a mom telling that teenager to call any time of day or night and she'll answer the phone cheerfully. Oh I know that's what parents tell their kids but they don't mean it, not really. Parents aren't always thrilled to have their kids speak to them. Ever watch a little child chatter away while Dad is reading the paper or watching the game? He's not really listening to the child even though he may nod his head and occasionally grunt a reply. God isn't like that, however. He never tires of hearing your voice – even when you come to him with the usual litany of aches and pains. But don't forget to thank God for these too. Like rumble strips on the side of the road, God uses these aches and pains to warn us to keep our eyes on Jesus lest we drift off heaven's road.

A number of years ago king David and his men returned home after a weary three day journey. They found that while they were away, an enemy tribe had made a raid on their homes and had burned them to the ground. On top of that, their wives and children had been taken captive by the enemy. It wasn't long before morale hit bottom. What did David do? He shifted the pressure from his own shoulders to the Lord's. He knew that the stress was too big a load for him to carry alone. Someone once said, "I consider myself the warehouseman, not a warehouse. I only handle each burden long enough to unload it in the warehouse. God is the warehouse. I am the warehouseman." Yes, take it to the Lord in prayer, and life becomes manageable and less stressful. Still another reason to be an optimist is that we can give thanks in every situation.

18) Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Corie Ten Boom and her sister Betsy were kept in a Nazi concentration camp in Ravensbruck. It was terribly overcrowded and flea infested. Corrie and Betsy had managed to smuggle a Bible into the camp, and in that Bible they read these words from Thessalonians. Betsy decided that this meant they should give thanks for the fleas. Corrie told Betsy she was nuts. But over the

next several months a wonderful curious thing happened: They found the guards never entered their barracks. This meant the women were not abused. It also meant they could hold Bible studies and prayer meetings. They had a reason to give thanks. As it says in Romans 8:28: ***“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*** Instead of asking “Why is this happening to me, God?” why not ask, “What are you teaching me through this, God?”

Another way to be an eternal optimist is: **(19-20) Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt.** In Florida, when they are developing land for a subdivision, they clear out the trees with heavy earthmovers. They push the trees into a pile, and then have a controlled burn. In a short period of time, the trees are burned up. It would be the height of stupidity to have a tanker plane dump cold water on the stump pile. And So as Christians, we know the Holy Spirit works thru the Word of God. You need to be around it, hear it, to keep the fires of optimism alive and well in you. When you contemplate Jesus and how wonderful he is in the Word, it stokes the flames. You pour cold water on yourself, when you infrequently hear God’s Word. When in our personal lives we treat the Word of God as a museum piece – something to be admired but not to be touched – we cut ourselves off from its power and influence. In Romans (10:17) Paul writes ***“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.*** To disregard the Word is to treat it with contempt. A second way is to not live according to it. The ancient church father Chrysostum said *“an impure life extinguishes the gift of grace.”* In other words, if there is sin in our life – either unconfessed sin or sin which we’ve become very comfortable with or tolerant of, we treat God’s Word with contempt.

With these words Paul encourages us to recognize the Word of God for what it is – fuel for our fire. And when the fire of faith burns brightly within us, negativity shrinks away because of the heat. The Final optimist pill **(21-22) Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.** The Greek word for test has to do with proving the genuineness of a coin. In the same way, we are to **“test everything.”** How? By sifting it through the sieve of God’s Word. That which passes through we are to use. That which doesn’t, we are to **“avoid.”**

What does God want for Christmas? The same thing we do actually: happiness. But not the happiness that comes from a box under the Christmas tree or from going on a Caribbean vacation for Christmas. Such happiness fades as fast as it takes Wal-Mart to take down its Christmas decorations and put Valentine’s Day displays. Genuine happiness or optimism, on the other hand, comes from being in Christ. In Christ we will always rejoice and give thanks no matter what our situation because we have the forgiveness of sins. And if you have forgiveness, you have eternal life and God’s promise to watch over you in this life. So Brothers and Sisters, **“Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”.**