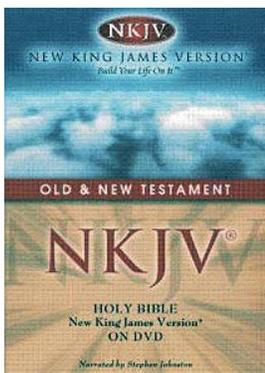


Sunday Bible Study

September-October 2013

Discussion Leader: Dee Bethke

You will show me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures
forevermore. Psalm 16:11

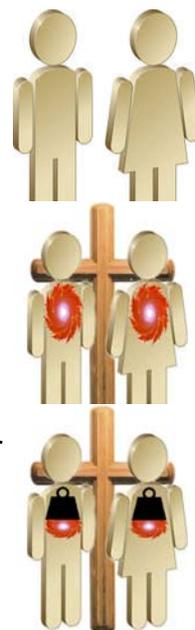


All text Bible references, unless otherwise identified, are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV) of the Bible.

Introduction

One of the most wonderful gifts we receive when we become Christians is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is critical before we begin our discussion of the *Joy of the Lord* that we understand the amazing gift of the indwelling Spirit. There are three important things to understand:

- **Requirement.** Before we believe, we do not have the power of the Holy Spirit available to us. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us the moment we place our faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- **Permanence.** God gives us the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit the moment we believe, and God is faithful. We can always depend upon the promises of God and we can also depend upon God's gifts to us. This means that we can **never** lose the indwelling Spirit.
- **Access.** Although we cannot lose the Spirit, we can do things or not do things that impede our access to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We will explore the things that quench and grieve the Spirit as part of our study of the *Joy of the Lord*, just one part of the gift that is the indwelling Holy Spirit.



Our study of the *Joy of the Lord* has two major parts—which in the world of technical writing would fall under the headings of the theoretical and the practical, the what and the how-to. The first part of our study explores some key scriptures and writings to determine what the *Joy of the Lord* is and what it is not. Then we turn to the practical to explore ways we can realize the *Joy of the Lord* in our own lives.

What is the JOY of the Lord?

Before we explore how we can fully realize the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives, we must first have a clear understanding of what the *Joy of the Lord* is and what it is not.

The Joy of the Lord is a Gift

First, the *Joy of the Lord* is a gift from God. It is one of the nine components that make up the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Galatians 5:22-23

When we are saved, the Holy Spirit brings the *Joy of the Lord* into our hearts as a precious and abiding gift. But we must understand that we cannot receive, retain, maintain the *Joy of the Lord* on our own. The fuel that continually refreshes and renews the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives is our focus on the source of that joy, the Lord.

That great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, in his New Year's Eve Sunday sermon in 1871, explained to his congregation the abiding nature and the requirements of this precious gift.



But, beloved, we are not left to search for joy; it is brought to our doors by the love of God our Father; joy refined and satisfying, befitting immortal spirits....Let us endeavour to analyze that special and peculiar pleasure which is here called "The Joy of the Lord." It springs from God, and has God for its object. The believer who is in a spiritually healthy state rejoices mainly in God himself; he is happy because there is a God, and because God is in His person and character what He is.

The Joy of the Lord is Not Happiness

A study of the etymology of the word happy tells us that the root word *hap* meant chance or fortune when the word was coined in the 14th century. Further, we learn that most of the early European words for happy actually meant lucky. Happiness is what psychologists call *subjective well-being*. Happiness is not an abiding gift like the *Joy of the Lord*, but instead it is a transitory state based upon current conditions or emotions. We are happy by chance not by divine provision.

A quick look around us provides clues that the world seeks happiness in all the wrong places. Bars have happy hours, where the implication is that we can find happiness by buying two drinks for the price of one. A magazine article provides Oprah Winfrey's ten tips for finding happiness. WikiHow, an internet information source, thinks it takes more effort to find happiness because they offer 19 steps. The Coca Cola Happiness web site asserts that they are in the "business of spreading smiles and opening happiness every day all across the world."

We must not confuse the world's definitions or perceptions of happiness with the *Joy of the Lord*. Happiness is emotion-based, transitory, and constantly changing. A study of past lottery winners, for example, indicates that what makes us happy today likely will not make us happy tomorrow. In fact, it seems a norm of human nature to always be seeking something new or something more as a source of happiness—more money, new experiences, new entertainments.

But the *Joy of the Lord* is an enduring, constant, and always available gift from God. Moreover it is a gift—as are all the gifts of the Spirit—that has depths and blessings that we cannot reach on our own. Consider the following verse from the second chapter of I Corinthians.

*¹⁰ But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? **Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.** ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. I Corinthians 2:10-12*

The message of this verse is that we can understand human things, human experiences, human happiness because we have the "spirit of man." But, only the Spirit of God knows the things of God, which is why it is particularly wonderful that God gives to each believer the indwelling Spirit so that we "might know the things that have been freely given to us by God." It is through the indwelling Spirit that we come to know and experience the *Joy of the Lord*.



In his commentaries, Matthew Henry explains the difference between happiness and the *Joy of the Lord* in this way:

Our pleasures here are transient and momentary, and such is the nature of them that it is not fit they should last long; but those at God's right hand are pleasures for evermore; for they are the pleasures of immortal souls in the immediate vision and fruition of an eternal God.

The Joy of the Lord Is Our Strength

We read in Nehemiah 8:10 that “the joy of the Lord is [our] strength.” God does not promise that we will have no worries, no heartaches, no health problems. Instead Nehemiah tells us that when we walk closely enough with the Spirit that the *Joy of the Lord* abounds in our hearts, that we will have the strength to withstand whatever happens in our lives.



David expresses this amazing truth in Psalm 119:27-28:

*Make me understand the way of Your precepts;
So shall I meditate on Your wonderful works.
My soul melts from heaviness;
Strengthen me according to Your word.*

David’s soul “melted with heaviness,” but He understood the true source of His strength. Scripture over and over reminds us of this uplifting and comforting truth.

⁴ *Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!*

⁵ *Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.* ⁶ *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;* ⁷ *and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.* Philippians 4:4-7

In this passage from Philippians, we learn how to experience the *Joy of the Lord*—by rejoicing in the Lord always—with thanksgiving! And, what is the promise? When we rejoice in the Lord always—even in times of sickness, sadness, loss—“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard [our] hearts and minds.”

Now look at this promise from Psalm 5 for those who rejoice in the Lord:

*¹¹ But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You;
Let them ever shout for joy, because You defend them;
Let those also who love Your name
Be joyful in You. ¹² For You, O LORD, will bless
the righteous; With favor You will surround
him as with a shield. Psalm 5:11-12*

The Lord will surround us “as with a shield.” When we walk with the Lord, we are surrounded by His strength, the strength that sustains us no matter what comes. The shield is a perfect analogy for God’s protection for a shield is a soldier’s protection in war. The shield does not stop the war. The shield does not remove the soldier from the war. When we walk with the Lord, when the *Joy of the Lord* fills our hearts, we are surrounded by His strength. The Lord’s shield surrounding us gives us the strength to better withstand the trials we must face in our lives. And the closer we walk with the Lord, the stronger His shield around us becomes, the more we can face our trials still knowing and exhibiting the *Joy of the Lord*.

The Joy of the Lord is a Powerful Witness

Have you ever wondered how the Church grew so rapidly in those early years? The message of the Good News of Jesus Christ spread like wildfire throughout the known world. The Bible gives us many indicators of why those early Apostles and Disciples were so successful in rescuing the lost.



We cannot ignore their spiritual gifts of preaching and teaching plus their hard work and perseverance, but there was something else that particularly speaks to the topic of our lesson. Consider these verses from Acts 13:

*⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. ⁵² And the **disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.***

Here we read that Paul and Barnabas were expelled from the region, but they “were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” Think of the witness that must have been to those around them. They were kicked out of town but they weren’t angry, they didn’t seek revenge, they didn’t grumble and mutter. They were filled with “joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

Just as the joy of Paul and Barnabas was a witness, our *Joy of the Lord* in all circumstances is a witness to those around us.

The Bible indicates that the *Joy of the Lord* was meant to be an important part of the lives of Christians, a visible witness of their faith. Consider these three examples of the instructions Paul wrote to encourage believers.

*Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Romans 14:16-17.*

Note that Paul combines righteousness with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. We can quench the Holy Spirit by the unrighteous things we do, the sins we do not confess.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

The indwelling Holy Spirit is God’s gift when we believe but our experience of the joy and peace that can be ours through believing depends upon the filling of the Holy Spirit. And, that filling of the Holy Spirit is what allows us to “abound in hope.” Recall that the filling of the Holy Spirit is not guaranteed like the indwelling of the Spirit. The filling of the Holy Spirit depends upon what we do and do not do.

The next section discusses some of the things we can do to quench the Holy Spirit—to impede the filling of the Spirit. The second half of our study discusses some things that we can do to encourage the filling of the Holy Spirit in our lives so that we become a witness to the *Joy of the Lord*.

*And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith
Philippians 1:25 (KJV)*

Paul is promising to continue supporting the believers, but he also identifies a specific relationship between faith, joy, and the Christian way of life. Matthew Henry explains it in this way: “What promotes our *faith and joy of faith* is very much for our furtherance in the way to heaven. The more faith the more joy, and the more faith and joy the more we are furthered in our Christian course.”





Perhaps one of the most powerful messages delivered by the Apostles and Disciples was not their words or even their miracles but the *Joy of the Lord* in their lives. Recall that the jailor was drawn to the message of Christ because Paul and Barnabas were singing in their jail cell. How the Apostles *Joy of the Lord* must have drawn people to them so that they could hear the Good News. Do you think their message would have been as attractive, their ministry as effective, if they did not just exude the *Joy of the Lord* for all to see?

The same is true for us. When we have that right relationship with God that brings to us the *Joy of the Lord*, we have an air about us that is attractive. In sorrow or adversity, the *Joy of the Lord* gives us a strength and an inner peace that is inspiring. When we witness to the lost, the *Joy of the Lord* gives us a confidence, an inner peace, that is convincing.

The Joy of the Lord Is Not Guaranteed

Oswald Chambers in his wonderful devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest* says this about the Holy Spirit:

The voice of the Spirit of God is as gentle as a summer breeze—so gentle that unless you are living in complete fellowship and oneness with God, you will never hear it.

The filling of the Holy Spirit is not like the indwelling of the Spirit, a once and forever gift. The filling and its resulting *Joy of the Lord* is a renewable resource that must be refreshed daily by our walk with the Lord. Ephesians 4 has much to say about the things we do that grieve the Spirit—that make it difficult for us to walk with the Lord. Often we can't relate to the sin discussions in Scripture because it is so easy to say "I don't do that!" But in Ephesians 4, the Holy Spirit through Paul provides enough of a list of things that grieve the Lord, that we can easily begin to see ourselves as sinners who can grieve the Lord and quench the Spirit.

Consider these actions or behaviors that grieve the Lord described in Ephesians 4:

- Lying (v25)
- Being angry (v26, 31)
- Swearing or other corrupt words (v29)
- Being bitter (v31)
- Holding malice (v31)
- Gossip and other evil speaking (v31)
- Being unkind (v32)
- Lacking forgiveness (v32)

Now the things we do, like the hardly all-inclusive list above, grieve the Lord and quench the Holy Spirit and cause us to lose the *Joy of the Lord*. But we can also lose the filling of the Holy Spirit—and *the Joy of the Lord*—by what we do **not** do, which brings us to the topic of the second half of our study—what we need **to do** to walk more closely with the Lord, and to daily renew the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives.

What Can We Do to Realize the Joy of the Lord?

What actions can we take to fully experience the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives? In what is considered his very first Epistle, Paul wrote this advice from the Holy Spirit:

¹⁶ *Rejoice always,* ¹⁷ *pray without ceasing,* ¹⁸ *in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* ¹⁹ *Do not quench the Spirit.*

²⁰ *Do not despise prophecies.* ²¹ *Test all things; hold fast what is good.*

²² *Abstain from every form of evil.* | 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

There are many, many things we can do to improve our walk with the Lord—study the Word, witness and make disciples, work in the ministry of our church—to name just a few. But our discussion on how to daily renew the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives will focus on these three—taken from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18:

- Rejoice always
- Pray without ceasing
- In everything give thanks

Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

-1 Thessalonians 5:16-18



Rejoice Always

It is easy to rejoice about the good things that occur in our lives, but the command to *rejoice always* means we are to rejoice regardless of the circumstances. How are we to do that? If *rejoicing always* does not come naturally to you, consider these three approaches to changing your focus in order to develop the habit of rejoicing always:

- Begin the day with praise
- Focus on today's walk with the Lord
- Look for blessings.

Begin The Day with Praise

Praise is acknowledging and celebrating the glory of God, and we can praise God in many ways—in prayer, in song, as a declaration, speaking aloud, or sitting in silence. The point of praise, however, is that our focus—our whole attention—is directed toward the glory, the power, the majesty of our God.

We all know that we should praise God—because He seeks our praise and because He deserves our praise. Charles Spurgeon explains the need for praise in this way:

*Preaching is sowing, prayer is watering, but praise is the harvest.
God aims at his own glory so should we.*

But why should we **begin** our day with praise? If we wake up and begin immediately to think of what we must do this day, of how we feel, of what is wrong, we have set the focus for the day on ourselves instead of on the Lord. We have begun to stifle the filling of the Holy Spirit. Starting our day with praise is an excellent way to focus our attention away from ourselves and onto the Lord and our walk with Him before we do anything else. Praise lifts the weight of our troubles from the Spirit.



David recognized the need to begin the day in the presence of the Lord when he wrote Psalm 5:

*Give ear to my words, O LORD, Consider my meditation.
² Give heed to the voice of my cry, My King and my God,
For to You I will pray. ³ My voice You shall hear in the morning, O LORD;
In the morning I will direct it to You, And I will look up.*

Praise, the ability to “look up”, does not come naturally to every believer. To demonstrate this fact, type “How to praise God” into Google and look at some of the 35 million references that pop up. There are articles and essays by preachers, teachers, bloggers, and just ordinary people on how to praise. One pastor indicated that he, a normally glib person, became tongue-tied when he tried to praise God. He reported that his ability to praise was transformed when he read a segment of a devotional by Cecil Murphy entitled *Invading the Privacy of God*.

In the study Murphy described the way that he focused each day during his praise time on one attribute of God. He concentrated on God as the Wonderful Counselor one day, the Mighty God the second day, the Everlasting Father the next day, and the Prince of Peace the following day (Isaiah 9:6). Some days he would praise God for being a refuge in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1); other days he would focus on God's faithfulness (Lamentations 3:23).

Conversations with other Christians reveal the myriad ways that we can praise God. One friend reported that she begins every day by reciting the 23rd Psalm. Another begins his day watching the sun rise and praising God for all of the beauty He has provided in the world. Yet another spoke of praising God each morning by thanking Him for every wonderful gift that He had provided in her life—a wonderful husband, children and grandchildren, home, her friends, her education, her career which brought great satisfaction, the books she now has time to read, etc.



Many Christians praise by singing or reciting hymns. One favorite praise song is *For the Beauty of the Earth* and I originally put the words for that song here. But recently I have been waking and reciting (or singing) a recent choir chorus:

*Jesus, you're the center of my joy. All that's good and perfect comes from You. You're the heart of my contentment. Hope for all I do.
Jesus, you're the center of my joy!*

Other Christians read Scripture to spark their praise time. The booklet Pastor Kevin Redig provided for his sermon series on the Book of Psalms lists the following Psalms under the heading "General Praise": Psalm 8, 19, 29, 81, 93, 103, 104, 108, 113, 138, 139, 146-150. For example, Psalm 113 begins and ends with praise to the Lord and reminds us that the Lord is timeless (from this time forth and forevermore), that He is all-powerful (the Lord is high above the nations), that He is merciful:

Praise the LORD!

Praise, O servants of the LORD, Praise the name of the LORD!

² *Blessed be the name of the LORD From this time forth and forevermore!*

³ *From the rising of the sun to its going down*

The LORD's name is to be praised.

⁴ *The LORD is high above all nations, His glory above the heavens.*

⁵ *Who is like the LORD our God, Who dwells on high,*

⁶ *Who humbles Himself to behold*

The things that are in the heavens and in the earth?

⁷ *He raises the poor out of the dust,*

And lifts the needy out of the ash heap,

⁸ *That He may seat him with princes—With the princes of His people.*

⁹ *He grants the barren woman a home, Like a joyful mother of children.*

Praise the LORD!

In virtually every verse of this and the other praise Psalms, we can find ideas for our own praise of the Lord and begin our days with a heart open for the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Focus on Today's Walk with the Lord

In order to grow in the *Joy of the Lord*, we must focus each day on our walk with the Lord. But, too many people spend their energy and dull the Spirit's gentle voice in regrets, anger, or bitterness over what has happened in the past or in worrying about what might happen in the future.

Forgetting Past Hurts. Past events—no matter how hurtful, embarrassing, unfair, or sad—are past. They cannot be changed. Surely, we can take responsibility and apologize when we are wrong and work to repair fractured relationships. That is both Christian and healthy. But clouding our lives with anger or bitterness or debilitating sadness about past events that cannot be changed is pointless and it impedes our walk with the Spirit.

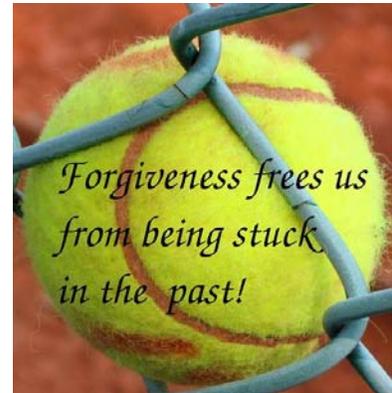
The very first step in letting go of past hurts is forgiveness—first forgiving others for the things they have done that hurt us and second seeking forgiveness for the things we have done that were hurtful to others. Jesus provided excellent instruction on both granting and seeking forgiveness in this verse in Mark 11:25-26:

²⁵ "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. ²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

Granting and seeking forgiveness is the first step in the process of letting go of the hurtful things of the past, but there is another vital step. To avoid clouding our daily walk with the Lord with an unhealthy focus on the past, we must *believe* in the forgiveness—our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of our sins. We must believe in the forgiveness enough that we can stop dwelling upon the wrongs and slights of the past and live productively today.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul discusses the power that comes when we seek forgiveness in a godly manner and then accept the reality of that forgiveness:

⁹ Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. ¹⁰ For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. ¹¹ For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter. II Corinthians 7:9-10



Accepting Sorrows and Afflictions. When we forgive, letting go of anger or disappointment is easy compared to accepting a great sadness. How can we possibly forget the pain and loneliness of losing a loved one? How can we ever live joyfully with the results of illness or disease? The *Joy of the Lord* does not depend upon forgetting those we have loved and lost nor minimizing the ravages of illness or disease. It depends, instead, upon our trusting enough in God and His promises to continue our lives in fellowship with and service to our Lord despite our losses or infirmities. It depends upon us doing everything we can to be sound and whole and living in the present. For example, if we are clinically depressed, we need to seek help. We also need to guard our health and well-being by eating well, exercising, and getting enough sleep. The Bible even gives us such advice:

*It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late,
To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved sleep.*
Psalm 127:2

We can banish our regrets with celebration. If we have lost someone, we can savor the joyful memories rather than basking in the pain of loss. If we are limited by infirmity, we can rejoice in the abilities that remain.

Trusting the Future. Similarly spending too much time worrying about the future is just as pointless as living in the past. My mother, a naturally wise person, often told me, "You cannot spend your life worrying about what might happen. Instead prepare yourself to cope with whatever occurs." And, Christians know that faith in the Lord is the very best preparation.



Remember what Jesus taught His disciples:

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. ²³ Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? ²⁵ And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? ²⁶ If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest? ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ²⁸ If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? Luke 12:22-28

Worry stills the voice of the Holy Spirit and dulls our *Joy in the Lord*. Plus, when we worry, we are generally wasting our critical resources on things that we cannot change. A fourth century poet expressed the importance of focusing on today beautifully:

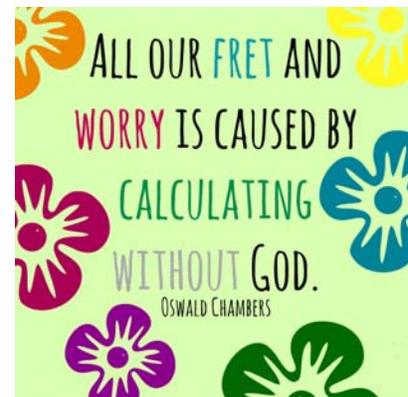
*“Yesterday is but a dream, Tomorrow is only a vision.
But today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness,
and every tomorrow a vision of hope.” Kalidasa*

And couldn't we simply change a word or two in this verse and make it apply to standing as Christians:

*Yesterday is but a dream, Tomorrow is only a vision.
But today lived in the Spirit makes every yesterday
a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope.*

Look for the Blessings

It easy to say, “Forget the past and stop worrying about the future!” Actually forgetting and avoiding worry is another issue entirely—it is simply easier said than done. One way to “rejoice always” is to look for the blessings in each and every situation. Some call it optimism, some speak of the glass half full. But for the Christian it is focusing upon the blessings the Lord has already given us and seeking the hand of God in every situation.



Long before Christ went to the cross for our salvation, look what the prophet Habakkuk, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote:

*Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock may be cut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls—¹⁸ Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

*¹⁹ The LORD God is my strength;
He will make my feet like deer's feet,
And He will make me walk on my high hills.*
Habakkuk 3:17-19

Our very first and greatest blessing is our salvation. No matter what occurs in our lives, our place in eternity is assured. Years ago I was so touched by a friend who had liver cancer that was not discovered in time for effective treatment. She showed such amazing courage that she was an inspiration to many. When asked how she could be so brave, she said, “When I look at my life right now, eternity in paradise with the Lord is such a wonderful alternative that I can't wait.” Her family was upset when she refused extreme treatment options, but she said, “Don't worry, I know where I am going.”

Another constant blessing in our lives is the beauty of God's creation that surrounds us. Every sunset, flower, bird, cloud, rainbow is a testament to God's love for us. At every moment—no matter how difficult the moment may be—there is beauty around us that is cause for rejoicing. There is beauty around us that is a reminder of God's love for us. It is difficult to find the blessing in times of distress or illness, but the blessings are always there. A friend who was hospitalized with a debilitating illness said one day, "I think this is the Lord's way of telling me that I needed to slow down. I was so busy going and doing that I didn't have time for the things that are important. I realize that now."



In all things and circumstances, God's blessings surround us. The question for us is, "Do we recognize, seek, rejoice in God's blessings—especially when things are not going the way we expect them to go."

Pray Without Ceasing

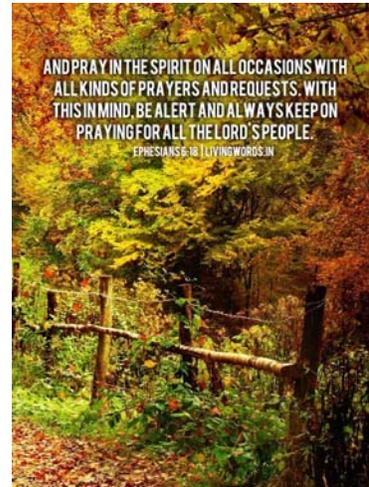
Our second step—pray without ceasing—is the greatest help in realizing the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives. If we are walking closely with the Lord and we have an open channel of prayer, we can turn our hurts and our worries over to the Lord before they can dim our communication with the Spirit that brings us the *Joy of the Lord*.

The instruction to "Pray without ceasing" is in itself a blessing from and promise of God. It tells us that God is always listening, always open to receive our prayers. It assures us that we can pray as often as we wish to or need to pray to the Lord.

Charles Spurgeon in an inspired sermon based upon the text in I Thessalonians 5:16-17 had this to say about the connection between rejoicing always and praying without ceasing:

The command to pray without ceasing "comes immediately after the precept, 'Rejoice evermore;' as if that command had somewhat staggered the reader, and made him ask 'How can I always rejoice?' and, therefore, the apostle appended as answer, 'Always pray.' The more praying the more rejoicing. Prayer gives a channel to the pent-up sorrows of the soul, they flow away, and in their stead streams of sacred delight pour into the heart. At the same time the more rejoicing the more praying; when the heart is in a quiet condition, and full of joy in the Lord, then also will it be sure to draw nigh unto the Lord in worship. Holy joy and prayer act and react upon each other."

The first question that comes to mind when we read this instruction is: “Are we to spend all of our time with our heads bowed in prayer?” Certainly some over the centuries have taken this instruction as an calling in their lives. But, if we are not to be monks in a monastery, that hardly seems practical. In the context of our lesson our openness to prayer, our willingness to pray is a key factor in our ability to realize the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives. Note that Charles Spurgeon stated “The more praying the more rejoicing.” In other words, the more we pray, the more we realize the *Joy of the Lord* in our lives. But the question remains: “How can we pray without ceasing and get anything else done in life?” This question assumes that we must stop what we are doing to pray. It implies that there is a special attitude or position required for prayer. Matthew Henry answer this question as follows:



The meaning is not that men should do nothing but pray, but that nothing else we do should hinder prayer in its proper season.

What this means is that prayer does not depend upon voice, position, or place, but is instead an attitude we develop that is always open to prayer. In an excerpt from his book *Alone with God*, John MacArthur wrote:

To "pray without ceasing" means when you are tempted, you hold the temptation before God and ask for His help. When you experience something good and beautiful, you immediately thank the Lord for it. When you see evil around you, you ask God to make it right and to use you toward that end, if that is His will. When you meet someone who does not know Christ, you pray for God to draw that person to Himself and to use you to be a faithful witness. When you encounter trouble, you turn to God as your Deliverer.

Our ability to “pray without ceasing” is a vital factor in our ability to experience the *Joy of the Lord*, especially in difficult times. As we develop and nurture our openness to prayer, we become more willing to turn our troubles and sorrows over to the Lord. How much more effective is it for us to stop clouding the *Joy of the Lord* with worry and instead give the problems that we cannot solve to the Lord.

In Everything Give Thanks

Here is another instruction that is tough to understand. It doesn’t say give thanks when everything is going smoothly, when we are happy, when we feel good. That is easy to do! No, the verse tells us we are to give thanks in *everything*—in every slight, in every trial, in every loss, in every illness, in every disappointment.

Pastor Kevin said in a sermon recently that when he finds a difficult scripture in the New Testament, he looks for an example in the Old Testament that will help him understand what God wants us to learn from the scripture. The perfect Old Testament picture for this verse is found in the Book of Job.

Job suffered every problem that could befall a human. One commentator said that no one in the Bible, except Christ, suffered more than Job. He lost all his wealth and properties. He was visited with terrible pain and suffering. His wife turned against him, and his children were killed. Even his friends, when they came to comfort and help him, ended up blaming and criticizing him. But in spite of all of this, Job praised the Lord, and even thanked him for the hard times. Job's wife told him to "curse God and die", but Job, instead, said this:



Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? Job 2:10

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. Job 1:21

So the Book of Job gives us a graphic, all encompassing picture of what God means by "in everything give thanks." Job says, "Blessed be the name of the Lord" in the midst of every and all possible trials. No matter what happens to us, Job had it worse. We have the example of Job, but does that really help us to understand why we should give thanks to God even when bad things happen? Let's explore just three powerful reasons to give thanks in *everything*:

- To please God.
- To benefit ourselves
- To give the Devil a black eye

It Pleases God When We Give Thanks in Everything

If we are questioning why we should give thanks in everything, the rest of the verse in I Thessalonians 5:18 gives us the best answer to our question:

... in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

We are to give thanks in everything because "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus." This is what God wants us to do.

It Is Beneficial to Us to Give Thanks in Everything

Giving thanks opens our hearts to the *Joy of the Lord* where griping, complaining, and recriminations impede the filling of the Holy Spirit and diminish the *Joy of the Lord*. The *Joy of the Lord* brings a peace to our lives that is beneficial. While negative attitudes can exacerbate our problems. For example, there is much research that indicates a positive attitude has beneficial effects on health and healing and even aging.

ABC News recently reported “An optimistic attitude can do wonders for patients' recovery, according to researchers who reviewed 16 studies that looked at patients' attitudes toward health. The studies spanned 30 years and looked at patients' attitudes after surgery. The review appears in the August issue of *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.” *The Huffington Post* reported on studies by Yale researcher Becca Levy. Her 2002 study shows that seniors with more positive views of aging lived, on average, 7.6 years longer than those with more negative views. Other cited studies indicated a positive correlation between a good attitude and health and healing.

Although none of the researchers credit the *Joy of the Lord* or the action of giving thanks in everything, the research certainly applies. What better way to have a positive attitude than to open our hearts to the *Joy of the Lord*.

It Gives the Devil a Black Eye to Give Thanks in Everything

The third reason we should thank God in everything is because of His role in our lives. God is the creator of all things right and beautiful in our world, but He is **not** the author of our difficulties. Our difficulties may be the result of our own poor choices, the poor choices of others, the work of the devil. But they are not from God.

The Scriptures clearly show the Devil is the cause of all of Job's trials. And, what is the Devil's purpose in visiting all these trials on Job? The Devil wanted Job to curse God. In fact, several writers commenting on the instruction to “in everything give thanks,” stated that blaming God for our hardships and trials is just what the Devil wants. We thwart the Devil when we turn our troubles and trials over to God and give him thanks in everything. As Joyce Meyers put it: “The biggest black eye that you can give the devil is to give God your pain and let Him turn it into gain.”

Summary

We can give thanks in everything because God is our refuge and comfort and that is His role in our trials.

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrew 4:16

Vistoso Community Church

OUR PURPOSE

The purpose of Vistoso Community Church
is to bring glory to God by completing
the work He has given us to do.

John 17:4

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to be used by God to help
the lost receive eternal life,
and those with eternal life to grow
in grace and knowledge.

OUR CORE VALUES

- Christ is the only Lord and Savior. Acts 2:36
- The Bible is the inspired word of God. II Timothy 3:16-17
- We honor God through traditional worship: Psalm 19:14
- Our loving fellowship strengthens us. Hebrews 10:24-25
- Seeking the lost is our commission. Matthew 28:19-20
- The principles of divine establishment are God given.
Nehemiah. 4:14



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