

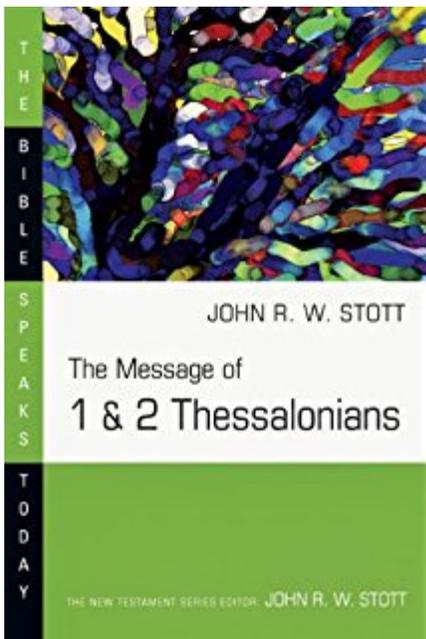
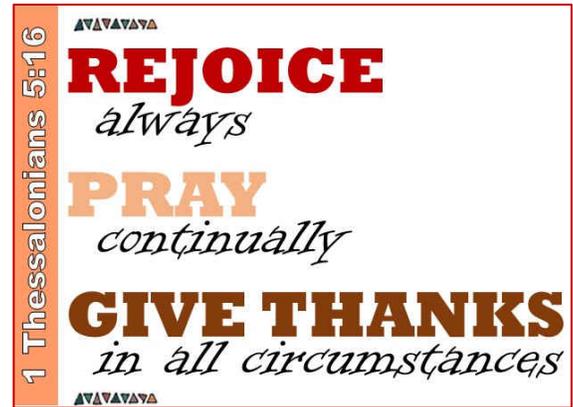
Can you imagine if the Apostle Paul were your pastor? You might go to him in a very great time of difficulty and share the burden of our life. For example, you might tell him a con artist had stolen all your money. Or that you had just received a terminal diagnosis.

Our epistle lesson today tells us what Paul would say, what Paul DID instruct the church at Thessalonica to do:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

I’m not sure I would appreciate such advice, but that’s Paul’s. No half measures. Don’t just pray; pray without ever taking a break. Don’t just give thanks for the good things that happen to you, but be really glad about the bad things, too. WHAT? Don’t just rejoice once, but rejoice ALWAYS, forever and ever!

I suspect that we all would find these instructions impossible to carry out, and maybe even very hard to begin. Tasks we know to be impossible are SO hard to even start. Surely Paul knew that no one could do these things always, without ceasing, in all circumstances; no exceptions!



This is why the great evangelical theologian John Stott thought that Paul was instructing the whole church at Thessalonica to do these things, not individuals. Yes, we as individuals should rejoice, pray, and give thanks as a lifelong pursuit, Stott said, but a whole community of people would be required, he reasoned, to actually achieve these things all the time.

I knew John Stott, in my younger years. I thought he was a prophet when I moved to London, so I attended his mega-church there, where he was rector emeritus. What I discovered was that he had feet of clay, as they say. He had a rigidity about him that stifled his joy, especially on certain subjects.

This might not have been what the rock group, the Beatles, meant, but Stott’s understanding was “We get by with a little help from our friends.” Perhaps Stott thought this because he needed assistance from his community of faith to do what Paul instructs. And

maybe we all need help from our friends, from our community of faith, to permanently stay in a place of real joy, real prayer, and continual thanks to God.

Stott also thought that we humans cannot call up joy on demand. However, Abe Lincoln—a person of great Christian conviction—would have disagreed with Stott on this. Abe thought we are, each of us, exactly as joyful and content as we determine to be.

I wonder what you think: Can we “rejoice always” all by ourselves? Can we be joyful by determining to be joyful? And “Why should we even care?” you may be wondering.

In Paul’s day, the people in the young church in Thessalonica cared. Jesus hadn’t yet returned, as he had promised, and the people were being ostracized and discriminated against, even persecuted, all because of their belief in Christ Jesus. And Paul’s advice was to rejoice, pray, and give thanks, not just a little bit, but all the time. Think about that: Rejoice at being persecuted and give thanks for suffering, because Jesus suffered.

According to Paul, we are to rejoice because we belong to Christ Jesus, and (whether we know this or not) Christ Jesus always has our situation in hand. We can count on Christ, whatever happens to us.

Isn’t this what Paul himself did in prison? Paul sang praises to Jesus in prison—and Christ Jesus invariably would send an angel or earthquake or something that would break him out of prison. But Paul didn’t run away after he got sprung; he would wait in his cell, the door ajar, for the jailer to come so he could tell him and his family about Jesus.

According to Paul, we are to pray without ceasing so we can know and follow God’s will. In other words, we need continuous prayer to discern what God put us here to do and for the courage and wherewithal to do it. Isn’t that what Job did, when he lost everything? Pray, pray, pray! Eventually everything that Job had lost was restored to him.



Finally, according to Paul we are to give thanks no matter what. Because, after all, outcomes are **NOT OUR RESPONSIBILITY**. Outcomes are up to God. This is what we preachers remind ourselves each week: To be faithful, we merely have to do our part, do what God has called us to do. We give thanks for the opportunity to participate in whatever God is up to because it gives meaning to our existence.

Paul’s prescription for life is simplistic, in a way, but not easy to do. And yet, this way of life, of God-living, is far healthier than running around trying to subdue the universe to our will.

What would Church of the Resurrection look and feel like if we did these three amazing things: Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances.

On one level, we could truthfully say that our church would look a lot like it looks now. But here are a few examples:

Would we rejoice that our lights keep malfunctioning and see this as a “sign?” Would we give thanks for the children we have, rather than thinking of our church as child-deficient? Would we see our musicians as the gift they are RIGHT NOW, not some faded remnant of past glory? Would we give thanks for each misstep by one of our three tenant congregations, who surely are teaching us how to be, ourselves, good tenants?

Perhaps (God forbid) our redevelopment project will be “tagged out” at this late stage in the planning process. This is hypothetical, you understand, but would we blame our discernment? Each other? God? Or would we heed Paul’s instruction and continue to rejoice, pray, and give thanks to God, continuing to discern through prayer what God would have us do? I used to worry about this potential outcome, but no more.

Or (scarier yet) perhaps our redevelopment project will be approved. Would we rejoice about that? Would we continue to pray to know and follow God’s will? Would we give thanks, even as we grieve the change required to do what we are called to do?

My money’s on Church of the Resurrection, by the way. Why would we stop rejoicing now, discerning now, or giving thanks now, come what may? But I’m surely going to need to lean on you!