

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil. ²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

If I say the phrase, *“On your marks, get ready”*, you will all say *“Go”*. That is phrase often times used to start a race. When you hear those words you know that you got to get yourselves ready to go. And it is advantageous for us to be ready to go. A runner wants to be the first out of the blocks. In car racing you want the pole position or best position for the start. And as we look at our text for this today, we see that God also wants us to be ready. In a way these words are God's way of saying *“On your marks, get ready, GO!”* As we make our Advent preparations, God wants us to:

Sermon Theme: Be Ready For Jesus' Return!

1. In God's care
2. In God's Word
3. In the faith

1. In God's care

We see that as we consider the Apostle Paul's words to the believers in Thessalonica. The city of Thessalonica enjoyed a great position itself. It was a prominent city in the Roman Empire, the leading city in Macedonia, the region north of Greece. It had a population of about 200,000 people. It was blessed with a good harbor so it was a center for commerce. It was about 40 miles from Mt. Olympus, the supposed dwelling place of the Greek gods... this gave the region some importance too. Thessalonians were used to being important... being well positioned... blessed, really.

And so are we. We too are blessed, simply by placement. We remembered how blessed we are in our nation at Thanksgiving, counting our blessings in this country. We have economic opportunities and stable government and compared to most of the world, a very good life. We are blessed as a congregation... blessed with talented people as we see his gifts on display all around us. We are blessed with this beautiful house of worship. It's easy to get used to it all, isn't it?

And yet, life isn't always a bed of roses now, is it? And so God reminds us through Paul to recognize our great position, under his care. Paul wrote, **“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”** That meant they were to be joyful on the days when sickness struck as well, or maybe even death... in all circumstances. They were to turn to God in prayer, continually... making it a part of their daily lives, not getting distracted by the pressures they felt from outside. And so through Paul, God says the same to us... **“be joyful always.”** Some days that's easier than

others, isn't it? We've had some of those cloudy, dark days of winter this week... what a difference it makes when the sun comes out, doesn't it? If only we could remember that the sun is still there, shining on the other side of the clouds... and that's the key to being joyful always, it's knowing that God is still there, we are under his care even as difficult days come our way.

Maybe it's the same things in our lives, illness and difficult days. Maybe it's the really big things... the things that when they're not right, nothing's right. Like your health... does God really want us to be joyful when our health is poor at best, and the outlook to get better seems bleak? Well, yes he does. And we do that by seeing his gracious and guiding hand and not just seeing the problems.

Difficult days are nothing new... they've been happening ever since the fall into sin. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit and allowed sin to enter our world. God told Adam and Eve it would be hard. He told Eve **"...with pain you will give birth to children."** And as far as her husband? God said, **"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."** He was saying "you will long for your husband to be the man I want him to be too... but now that you have brought sin into the world, it won't always be that way." And Adam wasn't going to have the perfect life he started out with, as God also told him, **"Cursed is the ground because of you; ... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground."** So we too might have days that are harder than others. The work day is long and the pay check never enough. There seems to be conflict all too often in your home. Never lose sight of the fact that we are under God's care. In his wisdom he has given us the life that is perfect for us. He has given us the calling he has, as mother or father or son or daughter, as pastor or member of the church. He aims to bless us through those things, not to burden us. So see your health or wealth, with all the problems they seem to bring, as exactly what God gave you to point our hearts and faith to you and you alone. And if it isn't perfect, know that God works all things for our good. Know that he knows your struggle, and so pray... continually. Pray that he moves you to be the blessing to those around you he means you to be. Pray that he moves those in your life to do the same. But never lose sight of the fact that the sun is still shining behind the clouds. Never forget where we are, under God's care.

Just as Adam and Eve were; God knew what happened... he came looking for them in the garden, and called out **"Where are you?"** He knew where they were, but he was giving them the chance to turn to him and be comforted. And he then gave them hope... he promised a Savior, one who would come and undo all they had just undone... one who would come and restore the creation they had ruined. He promised his Son Jesus would come as their redeemer. That promise is still there for us, but now it's been kept. The prophets recorded it for centuries for us, telling how in Bethlehem of Ephrata, a virgin would give birth to her firstborn, a son. That would be called Immanuel... God with us. And the story of God keeping his promise has been passed on to us. This was the message that Paul had carried to Thessalonica, this is the good news of the gospel that has called people to faith in Christ these past 2000 years.

2. In God's Word

It was the message that Paul would encourage them to hold on to, even in the face of opposition. For those Thessalonians, perhaps young in their faith, there would be trying times ahead. Many of the Jews in the city came to believe in Jesus... plenty of others didn't. They chased Paul and his companions out of town, and when Paul went on to the next city of Berea, they sent agitators there as well. We might find it harder and

harder to speak to the truth of God's Word today, but we are still in a great position, because we still can still read and share God's Word. Not everyone enjoys the freedom to practice the Christian faith as we do. Not everyone enjoys the freedom of speech that we have. We are in a wonderful position, because we can be in the Word.

So let us listen again to Paul's words... **“Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil.”** What do we really do with that Word that we are in? Do we cherish it? Do we see to it we spend as much time in it as we do in the newspaper, or the fashion magazine? Do not put out the Spirit's fire... if faith comes from hearing the message, let's hear it... a lot. Let's be in devotions in our homes, as well as in worship here. Let's think about a bible study... the prophet's words are all there for us, recorded and preserved... do not treat prophecies with contempt. Cherish that word. And follow it. We treat God's word with contempt most easily when we hear what it says, but because of the weakness of our flesh, we don't follow it. We wander into sin. What an advantageous position we are in... we know God's will.. we have his Word to strengthen our resolve to follow it, so we got to use it and let it strengthen us. Paul says, **“Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”** There will be dozens if not hundreds of voices telling us that certain things are OK.... things that are actually sins. But there is one overriding voice we must listen to... the truth of God's Word... all messages must be tested by this standard, and if it's wrong... if it's evil... get away from it. Listen to the truth, and don't treat prophecies with contempt.

3. In the Faith

Or else we run the risk of losing the last great joy of being ready for Jesus' return.... We are so very blessed to be able to say that we are... in the faith. Paul tells the Thessalonians, **“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”** If we don't hold to the word, if we don't follow the word... how can we hope to be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ? And not that we think we're going to somehow stop sinning completely before Jesus comes, but if we persist in sin, it shows a weakness or a complete lack of faith. And being in the faith is not something we can 'give up.' For it is only by being in faith that we can stand blameless. It is only by trusting in that Savior that God promised to Adam and Eve that we have any hope of heaven. Jesus, God's own Son, came down as that miracle babe born in Bethlehem. He lived a holy life in our place, and his death on the cross was in payment for the sin of the world. Standing in the faith... standing, trusting in him, we are blameless and holy and pure. We put his righteousness on ourselves, as clothing suitable for the eternal wedding banquet in heaven. In the faith we are ready to go to heaven.

Because then we can be sure we are right with God.... his Son's perfection is granted us, his Son's payment for sin is credited to our account. Yes... in the faith is a great position. We are there because we have always been under God's care. In his care for us, he brought us to be in the Word... it worked in us through preaching and through baptism... and it has brought us into the faith. A wonderful position indeed... ready to celebrate our Savior's birth, ready for his coming again. AMEN