

"Be Prepared"

"Be Prepared to Give Thanks in All Circumstances"

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Our theme this year has been "Be prepared" and we've seen that phrase show up in many parts of the Bible or the concept shown in many areas of the Bible. The whole premise of 'be prepared' is to plan to live proactively for Christ instead of just living reactively which often doesn't show Christ.

For example: think about this past week. Did something happen to you this past week that was annoying or upsetting, frustrating or disappointing? Did you experience interruptions, hurt or even something painful (physical or emotional)? How did we respond to those things? Did we react with anger, faithless-ness or despair? Or did we react in a godly manner? Would our reactions have been more Christ-like had we known beforehand these things were going to happen? Probably.

Have you ever had a week go by where something didn't happen that annoyed us, frustrated us or even angered us? So if something along those lines happens to us almost every day, why don't we prepare ourselves for them so we can respond the way God wants us to? Instead of reacting poorly as we too often do?

Well there is hope for Jesus' followers if we prepare ourselves for the chance that something difficult or challenging will probably happen to us today. The apostle Paul helps us here in 3 short but powerful commands in 1 Thes. 5:16-18.

⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Or if we read it the way it reads in the Greek:

"Always rejoice, continually pray, in all circumstances give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

The Greek emphasizes 'always, continually and in all circumstances.' Now I can guess that your immediate reaction is 'I can't always rejoice or continually pray or give thanks in all circumstances!' But here's the thing; why would God command it if it weren't possible? And the reason we react that way is because we don't prepare ourselves to think this way. And in case you think the Thessalonians had an easy life that they could do these things more readily, let's get the context here.

How did things go for Paul when he first travelled to Thessalonica to preach the gospel?

Acts 17:1 When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. ⁴ Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

⁵ But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." ⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. ¹² As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. ¹³ But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

So things were pretty rough in Thessalonica. And we read this in 1 Thes. 1.

^{1:2} We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

So persecution and suffering was real for the Thessalonians. Most of the letter is an encouragement to keep growing in the faith in spite of difficulties. In 2:14 Paul says,

^{2:14} For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews¹⁵ who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone ¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

In ch. 3 Paul expressed his concern for them because Paul wanted to go visit them again but "Satan prevented them" (2:18) and then he had no contact with them for some months. But Timothy had been there and came to Paul and said they were hanging in there for the gospel. In ch. 4 Paul gives them some instructions about unity and behaviour and then assures them about what happens to believers who die before Jesus' return. Paul assures them that those who trust Christ for salvation will be with Christ when they die and return with Him when He comes back to earth to rule.

Here in 5:11-24 Paul finishes up the letter by encouraging them to strengthen their relationships with everyone to grow the church (vv.12-15) and now in these 3 verses he exhorts them in spite of suffering to . . .

Develop Spiritually Healthy Attitudes **(5:16-18a)**

These 3 commands are given in the imperative mood to say 'keep on doing this, make this a lifelong habit or keep doing this when the situation calls for it. We've already seen that the Thessalonians received the gospel with persecution and were still experiencing suffering for the gospel. The "in all circumstances" is connected to always rejoicing and continually praying and giving thanks. So what Paul means here is be prepared to develop a spiritually healthy attitude . . .

Of confident joy in God (v.16)

Paul has already connected joy to our confident hope in God in this letter. In 1:6 he said

⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

This joy comes from God's Holy Spirit. In Eph. 1:13 Paul says that we were sealed with the Holy Spirit when we heard and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ. So the Spirit came to dwell in us at salvation. When we believed we experienced a joy from God that we've never had before. That joy is always there since the Spirit is always with us. So this joy is not in our circumstances, it's in God.

Here in 2:20 Paul writes

¹⁹ For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

Paul has God's confident hope and joy that one day he will be with these believers in God's presence. So we need to always remember our joy in the Lord; our secure hope of who we are in God, who has sealed us by His Spirit when we trusted in Christ. So when difficulties happen we can have an inner confident joy that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:35-39). If we prepare ourselves with this perspective then when life's annoyances, frustrations, trials and persecutions happen we can remain calm knowing that our joy is not derived from how well our day goes but how secure we are in God in spite of a difficult day.

So develop a healthy spiritual habit that you won't let problems, frustrations and persecutions rob you of God's joy by reacting with anger or despair. Strive to have an inner attitude of confident joy in God who is in control of our life.

Continually pray. Develop a healthy spiritual habit . . .

Of a prayerful sensitivity (v.17)

Prayer is not limited to a **location** (church, house, etc.).

Prayer is not limited to a **position** (kneeling, sitting, etc.).

Prayer is not limited to a **time** (morning, evening, etc.).

Nor is prayer limited by **speech** (we can pray without words).

Since I can pray at any time or anywhere or in any position I can always be sensitive to praying to God about anything that His Spirit prompts me to pray. And that's the key; to pray when the Spirit prompts me to pray.

Paul says the same thing elsewhere in different ways:

Col. 4:2 Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Eph. 6:18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Often Paul said he “always prayed for all the saints” or here in 1 Thes. 3:10 he prayed “earnestly night and day” for them. I think Paul had his habits of prayer times (night and day) but that he was always sensitive to the Spirit when the Spirit brought to mind a person or a situation to pray. God doesn't take a break so that he's not available certain times of the day or in certain locations; he's always ready to hear our prayers. When our children are small and they come to us for the smallest things numerous times in the day we don't brush them off. Neither does God. So develop the spiritual habit of praying to God at any time or place, especially in all circumstances.

The 3rd command, to give thanks in all circumstances means to develop the spiritual habit . . .

Of a thankful spirit (v.18a)

To give thanks means you must thank someone for something. God of course is the recipient of our thanks. And to thank God assumes God is responsible for and in control of our life. So to give thanks in all circumstances is to look for how God is working in any situation to bring about His plan.

This is where Rom. 8:28-30 comes into play. Giving thanks means to acknowledge and appreciate God's activity in the circumstances – not necessarily for the circumstances – but even in the difficulties we might find ourselves in. Preparing ourselves with this spiritually healthy mindset will seriously reduce the knee/jerk negative reactions we so often succumb to when annoying, frustrating and difficult things happen.

Rom. 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. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also pre-destined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

“In all things” God works for the good of those who love Him (not everyone) and these are the ones He calls, foreknows, and predestines to be conformed to Jesus. So the believer is to thank God for the work that He does in all things to make us more like Jesus. This is what James 1:2-4 says,

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

So then God can use the frustrations, the difficulties, the interruptions and the hardships to conform us more to be like Jesus (the good He is doing in all things) if we are prepared for them and proactively seek to respond with inner joy (confident that God has a Christ conforming purpose in them), praying to see God's hand and purpose in the circumstance and then when we see how God is working give thanks to Him who is showing us that the circumstances that happen to us are not random nor wasted.

Always rejoice, continually pray and give thanks in all circumstances.

That word “in” is huge here. Because the word “in” changes the whole perspective. Paul is not telling us to always rejoice and especially give thanks about our circumstances. The reason why we react negatively at life’s difficulties and annoyances is we’re not spiritually prepared and we are not . .

Separating our Attitude from the Experience **(5:18b)**

Giving thanks in all circumstances is not the same thing as thanking God for the circumstances. No one would thank God for the bad things that happen but we who know God have the Holy Spirit who helps us see God’s perspective in life’s difficulties. We see how God spared thousands of people when the Las Vegas shooting happened. We see how God spared thousands of people in the hurricanes even though some people died and many properties were destroyed. We also saw how neighbours and strangers were moved to come, to give and to help people they don’t even know.

We live in a sin marred world and every person in it has a sin problem. There will be tragedies but there is also God’s hand in all of them if we prepare ourselves to have the spiritual attitude to look for them. In the day to day stuff, yes we’re going to be delayed, someone will let us down, someone will forget us, something will break – but those circumstances don’t have to define our response. Let God determine our response as we trust Him to do what His Word says He will do in us.

Maybe you’re thinking ‘I’m not like that. I can’t find God’s joy in difficulties; I hardly pray as it is let alone have a prayerful attitude all day; and I can’t thank God in life’s difficulties.’ Well, here’s how we can. We have to . . .

Know our Spiritual Strength **(5:18c)**

“For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” It is God’s will that we have confident joy, are sensitive to pray and develop a thankful spirit. Now if we’re not careful we can take this the wrong way. We could take it in the sense that ‘if it’s God’s will I have to rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks then I guess I better!’

But God doesn’t force His will on us. He gives us the choice. The word “will” means desire or purpose. It’s God’s desire that we live with confident joy, and talk to Him continually and look for Him in all things so we can thank Him that He’s everywhere and active.

If God wills it we can do it (v.18c)

God doesn’t expect or ask anything from us that He doesn’t enable us to do. If this is God’s will for us then God will empower us by His Spirit to become more joy filled, prayerful and thankful. This is God’s will for us *in Christ Jesus*. Here’s our power. We’re in Christ. We’re secure in Christ. He’s in us through His Spirit. His Spirit enables us – when we’re open to His leading – to have confident joy even in difficulties, to be prayerfully sensitive throughout our day and to give thanks for how He is revealing Himself. So then we have the power to live like this. Therefore,

If we’re in Christ let’s show it (v.18c)

It is God’s desire for us to grow in confident joy in Him because we are secure in Him if we’ve accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

It is God's desire to hear from us throughout the day, keeping constant communion with Him like a toddler who is constantly asking mom or dad for things and about things.

It is God's desire for us to look for Him everywhere and in everything that goes on around us. Sometimes it's not easy but if we look hard we'll find Him and then we will thank Him.

Develop these spiritually healthy attitudes a little bit more each day. If it's God's will He will empower us through Christ's indwelling presence.

We have to prepare ourselves to react godly to the unexpected and ungodly things that happen to us and around us. When we do respond in confident joy, prayerful sensitivity and thankfulness, a world who can't see life this way and is in need of sure hope will Lord willing ask us about this hope that is in that sees life so differently than they do. And then we'll also be prepared to give an answer for the reason of our hope.

* * * * *

If you have any questions or comments about this message please
contact us at olivet@rideau.net