GIVE THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

Thessalonians 5:16-18

“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Happy Thanksgiving! The words of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 are well known to most of us. How wonderful these words are. Thank God that this year we could complete our study of the whole 1 & 2 Thessalonians including these words of God. However, how much we actually live according to these words is a good question. A wonderful Christian life is there, but we cannot get it. On this Thanksgiving Sunday we want to study these words of God again so that the words be embedded in our hearts and minds that they may become blood and flesh in our body and life to our soul to live up these words in obedience to God. Then how wonderful and happy our life will be! Especially, may we truly become men and women of thanksgiving to God and to the people around us.

The words say, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Paul expresses the significance of this life of constant joy, continual prayer, and giving thanks in all circumstances with the words, “this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” What can be more significant than the will of God?

The world exists because of the will of God. We exist because of God’s will. In Revelation 4:11 twenty-four elders representing church believers say before the throne, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” And God’s will is the salvation of mankind and the establishment of Christ’s kingdom. God planned it and has led each one and each nation in this direction. In our daily bread of Isaiah 37, God said in verse 26, “Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass, that you have turned fortified cities into piles of stone.” These words were spoken to the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who invaded Judah, turning fortified cities into heaps of ruins. Even this invasion was a part of the grand plan of the God of world salvation. We remember the Lord’s prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (Mt 6:10). It is written in Hebrews 10:5-7, “When Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, “Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.”’” Christ Jesus came into this world to do the will of God – to offer his body to him on the cross. For this Jesus prayed at Gethsemane, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Lk 22:24). We know that God saves us through his Son, Jesus Christ, so that we might do the will of God in our lives. It is true to us that we came into this world to do God’s will, his good, pleasing and perfect will (Ro 12:2). John said in 1 John 2:17, “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” And Apostle Paul knew that God’s will for him was to complete God’s given mission. He said in Acts 20:24, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” How great it will be also to us when we fulfill God’s will of completing our mission. Then it is really striking that Paul says in here in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Be joyful always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” How great it will be when we live a life that fulfills this will of God!

Firstly, be joyful always. We need joy in life living in this otherwise sorrowful world. Joy is a Christian emotion, although Jesus was known as a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering (Isa 53:3), and Christian life is not problem-free but has many hardships. God is a God of joy. Genesis 1:31 says, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” At his creation God was glad and joyful. And he made a garden of Eden, a garden of delight, a paradise. Jesus performed the first miracle in a wedding in Cana in Galilee. All parents want their children to be joyful, not sad. In the same way, God wants his children to be joyful.

Our Christian joy is not external, but internal. Joy comes from God. Nehemiah 8:12, “Joy of the lord is our strength.” Joy belongs to God, and we can have joy from God and in God. Mary said in Luke 1:46-47, “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” As we studied in Habakkuk, the prophet said in Habakkuk 3:18, “I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour” regardless of his poor human conditions, no grapes on the vines, no food and no sheep in the pen. And Romans 14:17 says, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” The kingdom of God is the place of joy. Zephaniah 3:17 says, “The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” What an expression of God’s joy because of his love relationship with each of his people in Christ Jesus! He cannot overcome joy because of his love for them. He rejoices over us even with singing, quietly loving us. In this love of God, we can be joyful singing to him. Isaiah 62:4 also says, “No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah (meaning ‘my delight is in her’), and your land Beulah (meaning ‘married’); for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married.”

The command is “Be joyful always.” How can we be joyful always when the world is ever changing and our feelings are so changeable? It can be possible when we have Jesus in our hearts. It is as a Hymn Song says, “Where there is Jesus, there is heaven.” So even in his imprisonment Paul said in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice.” And God wants us to rejoice in partaking in Christ’s suffering and in the expectation of his coming again. Peter said in 1 Peter 4:13, “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

We also know that the word of God gives us joy. It is hard to maintain our Christian life without the joy of God’s word. 119:111 says, “Your statues are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.” And Psalm 119:162 says, “I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil.” And according to Psalm 1:1-2, “Blessed is he…whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” God wants us to have this joy from the word of God each week and each day. Serving God’s flock of sheep is not easy, but it gives us joy along with trouble and pain. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, “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? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.” Thank God for raising messengers and GBS leaders including S. Ian and S. Jemmie so we could have fellowship in the word of God and have the joy of hearing his word: “Caleb had a different spirit and followed the LORD wholeheartedly” “Everything is possible for him who believes” and “Have Faith in God.” It was also so good to hear the life testimonies of 11 people at the conference including Kane and S. Daniel. I also thank God for raising Sunday messengers who could speak the word of God, S. Ian, M. Moses, S. Daniel and myself.

It is good to know that in the spelling “J-O-Y”, J standing for Jesus who comes first, and then O for others, and Y, for yourself, comes last. When this order is set in our minds, we can have joy regardless of our human conditions. Also, we are aware that there is a joy-robber, Satan. Watch out for this joy-robber.

Secondly, pray continually. Prayer is our spiritual breathing. It means without prayer we cannot survive spiritually, as fish cannot survive out of the waters. Through prayer we have fellowship with God, listening to God and talking to him. We remember Jesus’ early morning prayer. Mark 1:35 says, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Jesus also prayed each evening. Luke 22:37 says, “Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives.” And it is written in Luke 22:39, “Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him.” There he prayed just before the cross. We see that Jesus’ prayer life was as usual. This indicates Jesus’ pattern of prayer. Acts 3:1 says, “One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon.” As for the apostles three in the afternoon was their prayer time. We can use the most proper time to pray. The important thing is to discipline ourselves to pray until it becomes our godly habit. Unless we form the habit of prayer, it is very difficult to keep praying. For there always seems to be more important things do than to pray and we put off prayer and miss the prayer time. When we are busy with no time to pray, the devil is very happy, for he really does not like us to pray. In fact, the devil is afraid of our prayer. James 4:7-8 says, “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.” Through prayer we can come near to God and resist the devil and he flees away. We are to know that prayer is our potent weapon.

We remember the Lord’s prayer, the prayer Jesus taught his disciple, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come…” When we pray, God’s glory and his kingdom should be our foremost concern. All our prayer topics can be related to this.

When we pray, we should believe that God hears our prayers. 1 John 5:14-15 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.” He wants us to pray believing that he hears us and works for us. Prayer moves God’s heart and prayer changes a night-like situation into day. The author of Hebrews wants us to know that we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weakness and encourages us to pray in 4:16: “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” We can come to him and pray with any problem. Paul said in Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God.”

God wants us to pray boldly and persistently. Jesus said in Luke 18:7-8, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” We should pray, asking, seeking and knocking until what we pray for is clearly answered. We are to pray holding on to his promise. Jesus said in John 15:7, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”

Thank God that throughout this year until now we could keep our Friday prayer meeting holding on to Acts 1:8, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses.” May we pray until this promise of Christ Jesus be true to us. May we all the more pray individually and together.

Thirdly, Give thanks in all circumstances. Thanksgiving is to be our basic attitude toward God for his living and all his blessings. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. How much we should be thankful for his existence and his creation. All things came from him, and he provided everything we need. In the Garden of Eden God said, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden…” (Gen 2:16). However, man fell when a thankful heart was lost. Romans 1:21 says, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.” Consequently, they were degraded from a spiritual level to a physical level only gratifying the sinful pleasures even through sexual perversion and rejecting and hating the truth of God. We can say that Jesus came to save sinners and restore their thankful heart to God. Paradise restored means thanksgiving restored. Heaven is the place of thankfulness, while hell is the place of unthankfulness.

Thanksgiving makes our life smooth and graceful. Thankful people are beautiful people. However, in our fallen nature, we are unthankful. Unthankfulness is natural. Thankfulness is to be learned. When we think of our lives, we received much. That realization leads to have a debtor’s heart which makes us humble and thankful. We sang the song, “Count your blessings.” When we begin to count God’s given blessings, thanksgiving begins to arise in our hearts. I really God that this year three families together along with S. Daniel and Kane could serve God together, studying the word of God together and prayer together with one spirit throughout this year. Thank God for granting us the words of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians, Nahum, Habakkuk, Titus chapter 1 and John 8. I thank God for our children worshipers, Daniela, Eunice, Jonathan, Abigail, and Joy, worshipping God together on Sunday. I realize that each of them is a worshipper of God. I also thank God that S. Ian’s parents, Sholter and Mearl could worship God together with us each Sunday this year. Thank God for keeping our student leader Sophie in faith through her faithful Bible study throughout this year and her service on club day. I personally thank God for growing Joy and helping us to keep praying for Sara Grace and the family believing that God will work out for the good, for his good purpose. Thank God for the birth of Dani and raising her up under the care of Paulina while Joshua works fulltime. I thank God for M. Sarah’s endless help and support in our family and God’s ministry, keeping her health. Thank God for guiding us to visit Korea and share the gospel of salvation with our family members, while our gospel coworkers kept God’s ministry with stewardship. Also, I thank God for enabling me to try to preach the gospel to at least one person a week at U of T campus.

The word of God says, “Give thanks in all circumstances” whether our situations are favourable or unfavourable. When things go well, we should remember God and thank God. When things do not go as we expected and unexpected things and even terrible things happen, we also should thank God even forcefully, saying, “Lord, thank you”, recognizing that he is sovereign and in all things God works for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his will. When worse things happen, better blessings are to come and greater things are to be expected. This is a teaching of the Bible as in the case of Joseph, who was sold as a slave in Egypt and then raised to the high position in Egypt, of David who was pursued by king Saul to the point of death and learned to depend on God and finally raised as a king of Israel, of Onesimus who had run away from his mater Philemon and then became a new creation in Christ Jesus and a dear brother to Philemon, and of Mary and Martha, who brother Lazarus died and raised from the dead by Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life. Jesus clearly said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” Indeed, they saw the glory of God through the sorrowful and tragic event of their brother’s death, when they put their faint Christ Jesus in the end. So we should thank God more for the adverse circumstances.

When we thank God, God can work miraculously. In Acts chapter 16, Paul and Silas were put in prison severely beaten after doing the work of God (Ac 16:25). Their feet were fastened in the stocks. In that situation about midnight they were praying and singing hymns to God. Then there was a sudden earthquake that led the jailer and his family to Christ Jesus and Paul and Silas themselves were released from the prison. On one occasion the people of Judah were under attack by a vast army of combined forces of neighbouring countries. The king and the people were alarmed and prayed. And in that situation, they praised God singing to the LORD, saying, “Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.” (2 Chron 20:21). Then the combined forces of the enemies fought against themselves and were destroyed. God gave his people a great victory.

Praising is the height of thanksgiving. The book of Psalms is full of praise to the LORD amid many human agonies and troubles. Especially the last five Psalms begin with “Praise the LORD” and end with “Praise the LORD”: In Psalm 146, “Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, O my soul. I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God along as I live…Praise the LORD”, in Psalm 147, “Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praise to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!...Praise the LORD”, in Psalm 148, “Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from heavens, praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all your shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the LORD…Praise the LORD”, in Psalm 149, “Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints…Praise the LORD” and in Psalm 150, “Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.” In his last Psalm, “Praise the LORD” or “Praise him” which is Hallelujah, appears twelve times. As long as we live, may we be full of thanks and praise to the LORD our God for his creation, his salvation in Christ Jesus with the eternal life and his coming again in the hope of Christ’s kingdom.

Let’s read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 together: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”