

## “Be joyful” 1 Thessalonians 5:16

### Introduction

**1. It was a warm summerlike evening when we were out for a drive with the windows down.**

I pushed the *scan* button on the car radio and listened to about 10 seconds of every station that came up on the screen. There was rock, jazz, sports, talk . . . and laughter. I stopped the radio at the laughter and left it on that station for nearly an hour.

After a while we figured out that it was some kind of a religious revival service with “holy laughter.” There must have been quite a crowd and they were totally into this.

At first Charleen and I laughed along with them. It was almost impossible not to laugh. We laughed out loud and out of control for the better part of 10 minutes. But, that was about all the laughter we had in us. (Minnesotans have a built in laughter-limit). It just wasn’t funny anymore. We left the radio on the same station until we just could not take it anymore. We were exhausted. We had to shut it off.

**2. St. Paul wrote to the Christians living in the Greek city of Thessalonica: “Be joyful always” (1 Thessalonians 5:16).** Is that what he had in mind? Laugh when you are happy; laugh when you are sad. Laugh when life is easy; laugh when life is hard. Laugh when your baby is born; laugh when your child dies. Laugh through life. *“Be joyful always.”*

**3. The teaching topics for Wooddale Church are carefully and prayerfully planned more than a year in advance.** Today’s eleventh sermon in the series on Words of Action is titled “Be joyful” based on 1 Thessalonians 5:16. Well, I’ve been sick all week and haven’t been laughing or happy. Nothing serious—just a cold that started last weekend with a sore throat, headache, slight cough, low fever and overall feelings of malaise. I made it through last weekend’s services as best I could but started deteriorating on Monday and Tuesday. I went to the Urgent Care on Wednesday for a strep test and chest x-ray and was told I’m sick but there really isn’t much to fix it so just wait until it goes away. That’s when I started working on today’s text to *“Be joyful always.”* I haven’t much felt like laughing or being joyful. **There are those who came to Wooddale Church today with heavy hearts, bankrupt finances, crumbling health and not much happiness.**

**4. So, what’s the deal?** Are Christians supposed to be pain and problem free? Because, if we are I can tell you the names of a lot of Christians with pain and problems. Are we supposed to laugh off suffering and always put on a happy face? Because, if that’s what we’re supposed to do I can tell you it’s not easy when singleness is lonely, marriage is stressful, jobs are lost and the diagnosis is frightening.

**The words of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 are written in the imperative mood which means that they are direct commands:** *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

We are ordered to be joyful always. This is God’s will for us to know and do.

## Happy . . . and not

1. **We are not commanded to be happy.** Happiness is all about feeling good and no one feels good 100% of the time. In fact, the Bible is quite clear that suffering, pain and grief are an inevitable part of our universal human experience. Constant happiness may have been experienced in the Garden of Eden but we've all lived outside that garden for a very long time.

2. **Job was a happy man whose life was struck with unexplained tragedy.** He summed up his worldview in just 11 words: "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Sounds pessimistic but there are a lot of testimonials of agreement.

3. **I don't want to build a case against happiness but I do want to explain what the Bible says.**

Romans 12:15 As Christians we "*mourn with those who mourn.*"

Isaiah 53:3 Jesus is prophetically described as "*despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*"

Philippians 1:29 Suffering is an inevitable part of our Christian experience, "*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him....*"

1 Peter 4:19 When Christians suffer we should not quit but keep on doing good no matter what. "*So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*"

4. **The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians knew firsthand about suffering, especially those who lived in the northern area of Greece where the Thessalonians lived.** Frankly, it's a little embarrassing to compare our suffering to the suffering of other Christians around the globe and throughout history. Today, Christians in Iraq, Iran, Egypt, North Korea and parts of Africa are being beaten, tortured, raped and murdered because they belong to Jesus. By contrast, our idea of suffering is a flat tire on an SUV, high blood pressure at an age few in history have reached, politicians on TV that we don't like and neighborhoods that aren't friendly enough.

5. **Just recently I was at an office reception where a man asked me to pray for persecution in America.** I get asked to pray for a lot of things but usually persecution isn't on the list. I asked him what he meant and he told me that American Christians are soft, self-satisfied and whine a lot. He said that we need the kind of persecution faced by Christians in China during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and I should pray for this.

Frankly, that's a prayer I don't feel led to pray. I told him about a conversation I once had with a Chinese leader who claimed that suffering is always part of the Christian life—no exceptions; all true Christians suffer. Knowing what believers faced under Mao Zedong and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) I replied that, if he is right, I've never met a Christian in America. I don't know anyone in Minnesota who has been burned, cut, starved, raped or watched their children tortured and killed because they are believers in Jesus. Truth be told, none of us have ever suffered like that. The Chinese leader said, "If you said that to your brothers and sisters who have suffered in China they would say that in America you do

not suffer for Jesus at the hands of your government but you suffer for Jesus in your families, through broken marriages and with prodigal children.”

6. **The point here is that we don’t get to choose our suffering but that we all suffer.** We’re not always happy but we can always rejoice.

2 Corinthians 6:4-10 *As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

Romans 5:3-5 *We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

7. **Read and listen throughout the Bible and it becomes clear.** Christians are not exempt from pain and problems. Christians are not perennially happy. What is different about us is that we have joy.

## Joy . . . and Jesus

1. **1 Thessalonians 5:16** “*Be joyful always.*”

This is either the most marvelous of truths or some kind of sadistic silliness.

If this is true it is absolutely revolutionary.

If suffering is normal and joy is always, we are of all people profoundly blessed.

2. **To understand and live out this powerful biblical truth we must distinguish between joy and happiness.**

- I think of myself as a happy person. I have a lot in life to be happy about. But, I long ago gave up on the notion that I can be happy all the time. Feeling sick, sliding on the ice and smashing up my car, watching friends suffer with cancer, agonizing over broken marriages—none of this makes me happy.

- Happiness is about circumstances. Joy is about perspective.

Happiness is about things we cannot control. Joy is about how we interpret them.

Happiness is about today. Joy is about the long term.

3. **The longest running film franchise in the English language is *James Bond 007*.** There have been 22 movies since 1953 and more are coming. It seems very unlikely that you don’t know the storyline and haven’t seen at least one Bond film. But, just in case you don’t know, James Bond is a British Secret Service agent who repeatedly saves the Free World from Communist attacks, terrorist plots, cyber warfare, nuclear weapons, submarines, missiles, airplanes, biological dangers and a whole lot more. In every movie he gets into situations that no human could ever survive. He jumps off mountains and lands on passing airplanes. He always survives.

When I watch a James Bond movie I get caught up in the plot, intrigue and danger. My heart beats faster and I worry about the safety of the hero. I fear that evil will triumph and good will lose. But, deep down inside I *know* James Bond will come out okay. I *know* for absolute sure that he will live and win. No doubt. How do I know? The writers and film studios are not going to let the James Bond franchise go away because he jumps off a mountain and misses the plane. It's just not going to happen.

When I watch a James Bond movie I never know exactly how it will end but I know it will end well for 007.

**That's the difference between circumstance and perspective.** Circumstance is the bomb, the bullet, the plane. Perspective is knowing how it will end. Circumstances controls happiness. Perspective gives joy.

#### 4. **Romans 8:28**

*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

#### **Romans 8:38-39**

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

#### 5. **In 1989 the Second International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne II) was hold in Manila.** I was privileged to attend. In a week of meetings there was one moment that stood out as a vivid example of joy in unhappy circumstances. The speaker was a Christian from China who had been imprisoned under the Cultural Revolution. He described some of the terrible inhumanities he faced; his stories made me cringe.

He told about the guards who assigned him to rake the sludge of human waste from a large cesspool. All the toilets and latrines drained into this tank and it would clog up if the bottom was not raked. His assignment was to walk into the cesspool every day until he reached shoulder depth and then spend hours raking up sludge off the bottom. I can't imagine anyone being happy with this job.

He then explained what a gift this was to him. The guards would never let any of the Christians sing hymns of praise to God. But, out in the middle of the cesspool he could sing as loud as he pleased and the guards never came in to stop him.

Then he began to sing his song from the cesspool:

*I come to the garden alone  
While the dew is still on the roses  
And the voice I hear falling on my ear  
The Son of God discloses*

*And He walks with me  
And he talks with me  
And he tells me I am his own  
And the joy we share as we tarry there  
None other has ever known*

**Circumstances—unhappy; Perspective—joy.**

6. **But let's come closer to home.** Because I worship in many services here at Wooddale Church it could become routine for me to sing the hymns and songs that are in all of our services. Sometimes I glance around and watch others sing.

As a pastor I get to know a lot of people's stories. I know about the child who died, the unwanted divorce, the difficult diagnosis, the chronic depression, the broken relationship. As I watch others sing I see them looking at the screens and singing the words with conviction and with passion. And, the otherwise routine words of Christian songs take on a completely new and different meaning. These are those who have walked through unwanted valleys and have joy. These are those who truly believe that God has not and will not abandon them. These are those who rejoice always.

**Conclusion**

1. **Our joy is not fake.** It is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "*No one will take away your joy*" (John 16:22).
2. **No matter what the circumstances—rejoice always.** Believe in Jesus to get you through. Trust him for the long haul. Happiness is about circumstances. Joy is about Jesus. Christ over circumstances. Rejoice always!