

*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. 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. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it.*

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 SS 12/11/11 Is. 61:1-3, 10-11 Jn. 1:6-8, 19-28 Ps. 98  
Hymns: 706, 102, 103, 94

## **HOW WE CAN BE JOYFUL AT CHRISTMAS TIME**

Dear fellow believers in the coming Savior,

Why should we be joyful at Christmas? That's a question many people struggle with at this time of year. After all, the world has its problems, and we all have our problems. They don't stop at Christmas time, and they'll still be there when Christmas is over.

There was a group of fellow Christians a long time ago in the city of Thessalonica who faced some very serious problems in their lives. Yet that didn't stop the Holy Spirit from giving them real joy and peace in Jesus, their Savior! That leads us to what we're going to talk about this morning: **HOW WE CAN BE JOYFUL AT CHRISTMAS TIME.**

The Lord through Paul and others established a congregation at Thessalonica. The unbelieving Jewish leaders there were jealous that people were listening to those men, and some of the people were believing in Jesus. The leaders stirred up lots of trouble for the apostles, and forced them to leave the city (Ac. 17). But in spite of the persecution the Christians at Thessalonica faced, the Lord kept them strong in their faith in Him. Paul was happy to be able to remind them, *"You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the Word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit"* (1:6).

Paul told them, *"Be joyful always."* With all the problems the Thessalonian Christians had the Lord encouraged them (in the original, literally) *"ALWAYS keep on being joyful!"* It doesn't help us to dwell on how unfairly we're sometimes treated because of our faith in Jesus. Whatever problems we may have, think of what Jesus had to suffer for our sakes on the cross. No one can ever take away our salvation in Jesus. No matter what happens to us, Jesus is what matters most in life.

*"Pray continually,"* Paul tells us, emphasizing *"CONTINUALLY!"* Talk to God throughout your day. It really helps. Take time throughout your day to thank and praise God. He deserves it, and you will feel better. Paul adds, *"For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* God wants us to pray to Him, and He promises He will answer us. Jesus says that *"at all times (we) ought to pray and not ... lose heart"* (Lk. 18:1). He assures us, *"EVERYONE who asks receives"* (Mt. 7:8). You are never alone! Jesus is always with you. We can come to God in prayer at any time. The Thessalonians were given the strength they needed from God through prayer to face every trouble in life, and so are we! *"CONTINUALLY pray,"* and don't give up.

*“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

In the original, the Lord emphasizes, *“IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES.”* Who doesn’t have problems? Still, we can *“give thanks IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES...IN CHRIST JESUS.”* Are things going well for you? Thank God. Are things going badly for you? Still, thank God. James says, *“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”* (1:2-4). The Lord was using the persecution the Thessalonians were experiencing to draw them closer to Him, and make their faith mature, and strengthen them. In spite of our problems, we can *“IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES give thanks”* because we know the spiritual good God is working in us through them.

*“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire!”* This is an on-going command in the original. The Holy Spirit enables us to do what God in His Word commands us to do. We’re told in the fifth chapter of Galatians, *“The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the [Holy] Spirit, and the [Holy] Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. ... But the fruit of the [Holy] Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”* (17, 22-23). We believe in Jesus, which is proof that the Holy Spirit is working in us! Don’t fight the Holy Spirit when He’s leading you to follow God’s Word and God’s will. Follow the Spirit’s lead. We’re told that the Holy Spirit is like *“fire”* – a POWERFUL force for good working within us! Whenever we’re moved to do what’s right and good, that’s the Holy Spirit working His fruits in us.

Paul told the Thessalonians, *“Do not treat prophecies with contempt.”* This, too, is an on-going command. The world is constantly *“treating (God’s) prophecies”* (God’s Word) *“with contempt,”* sitting in judgment of the Word of GOD! The Bible doesn’t make sense to our human reason. We can only understand what the Bible means and accept it by faith – the humble faith God works in us through our hearing of the Bible: *“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God”* (Ro. 10:17).

*“Do not treat prophecies with contempt.”* Don’t ignore or reject what the Bible says. Don’t let your reason or your feelings or what other people think keep you from believing what the Bible says. Be on your guard so that you’re not led astray from God’s Word, and maybe even end up losing your faith.

All of the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible does the teaching, and you and I listen and obey. We came to believe in Jesus through the Word of God. It is vitally important to our salvation that we keep hearing the Bible all our lives. We were told not to *“put out the Spirit’s fire.”* Since the way the Holy Spirit works in us is through the Word of God, the surest way for us to quench the Spirit’s working in us is for us to stop hearing God’s Word and taking it to heart.

We’re told literally, *“EVERYTHING keep on testing!”* *“Test”* in the original means to *examine something to see if it’s genuine.* The standard we go by is not what we think, but what the Bible says. Rather than *“treat prophecies with contempt,”* we honor what the Bible says in everything. God through His Word decides for us what is right and wrong, what is good and bad. Whatever is in agreement with what the Bible says is good. Whatever goes against what the Bible says is bad. Jesus tells us, *“If you continue in My Word, then you are truly My disciples, AND YOU SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH”* (Jn. 8:31-32). Every one of us can know the truth about the Bible’s teachings. Jesus promises us, *“My sheep hear My voice”* (through the BIBLE), *“and I know them, and*

*they follow Me*” (Jn. 10:27). As we keep turning to the Bible and praying to God to guide us, we cannot be led astray. Jesus will keep us faithfully following Him.

*“Keep holding on to the good!”* we’re told. No matter what you may be going through in your life, what your reason or experience tell you, or what ‘everyone else’ says, keep holding onto what the Bible says with all the strength God’s gives you. In the fourth chapter of Philippians God urges us to let our minds dwell on, and keep ourselves busy doing, what is good and positive and constructive; and God promises He will bless us with His peace. Even if something the Bible says seems like a small thing to us, it’s important enough to God that He recorded it for us in His Word. Since it’s important to God, it’s important for us to *“keep holding on to”* it. Jesus says, *“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much”* (Lk. 16:10).

The Lord says, *“Keep avoiding every kind of evil!”* In the original, this includes *avoiding not only what IS bad, but even what LOOKS bad to others*. I don’t want to confuse or offend someone by what I am doing, or lead someone astray. For yourself, keep away from people and places and things and activities that tempt you to do wrong. Don’t look at or listen to things that are harmful to your faith. Don’t let your mind dwell on evil. When Eve listened to the devil’s temptation, focused on the forbidden fruit, and thought about how good it would be if she ate it, she set herself up for the Fall. How often do we do the same kind of thing! God urges us, *“Flee ... lusts, and pursue”* (and run toward) *“righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart”* (2 Tim. 2:22).

We’ve been told all these wonderful things to do, and we know how blessed we are when we do them. Our trouble is, we’re sinful. We often fail to do what God says, sometimes miserably. The Son of God came down to earth to save us from our sins, and to enable us to do what we can’t do by ourselves.

Thus Paul says, *“May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.”* God is so good to us! He *“sanctifies”* us, which means that God has *separated us from* evil and *dedicated us to* Himself to live to His glory in everything we do!

Paul prays for us: *“May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept”* (from the original: *guarded and protected*) *“blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* The angel announced, *“To YOU is born ... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”* (Lk. 2:11). We poor sinners can rejoice that Jesus came to save us, and that Jesus is coming again to take us to heaven! Paul assures us, *“FAITHFUL is the one who calls you, and He will do it.”*

Why should we be joyful at Christmas? Why shouldn’t we be joyful! Sure, we have problems. But we also have JESUS! The Son of God came down to earth to save us. Jesus gives us joy, the privilege of prayer at any time, thankful hearts, His Holy Spirit, and His Word with all its wonderful truths. Jesus sanctifies us - helping us to turn away from evil and do what is good. And Jesus is keeping us blameless in His righteousness until the Day He comes again to take us to heaven. **THAT’S HOW WE CAN BE JOYFUL AT CHRISTMAS TIME!** Amen.