

The Grace of Joy

By Linda Rex

December 17, 2023, 3rd Sunday in Advent / Joy—Sometimes this time of year, we have a hard time coming up with any sense of Christmas cheer. It doesn't help that our budgets are tight and we're concerned about possibly catching one of the viruses going around at school, work, and the supermarket. This season may bring to mind significant losses or changes in our lives, and we may sense hovering over us a raincloud of grief, sorrow, pain, or even anxiety at having to cope with family issues as we gather with others.

On this Sunday of Joy in the season of Advent, we look at what the apostle Paul has to say about this in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24. He tells the believers at Thessalonica to “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks” and goes on to say that this is God's will for each of us who are in Christ Jesus. If we are in the midst of a snowstorm of grief and loss, it can be really hard to rejoice, much less give thanks. We may even find it next to impossible to pray—the words get stuck in our mind and heart, and nothing comes out. We can only weep.

So how do we respond to this imperative or command given to us in God's Word? When reading the commands or imperatives in Scripture, we must always first look for the indicatives or foundational spiritual realities on which those imperatives are based. In this case, notice the phrase, “*in Christ Jesus.*” This is important to pay attention to. Also, when we look a little further on, we see, “*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.*” Notice who is doing the sanctifying and who is bringing to pass our being without blame. Our wholeness is grounded in the God of peace who sanctifies us in and through his Son Jesus Christ.

Our joy isn't in the circumstances we are experiencing, though at times we may have joyful and happy experiences with family and friends doing things we enjoy. No, the source of our joy is our faithful God of peace, who has given us his Son and his Spirit. As we come to faith in Christ, trusting in God's grace and love, we are united with Christ and receive from him the Spirit. The Spirit of God pours into us Christ's own love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, and other fruits of the Spirit.

This means we are able to receive and experience Christ's own joy, even though at times our circumstances and experiences may be less than joyful. We are also able to be thankful in less than blessed circumstances, because we have already received the greatest gift possible, the gift of Christ in us by the Spirit, who enables us to be thankful in all circumstances.

Going even farther, being in union with Christ by the Spirit means that we share in Jesus' own life of joy and thanksgiving in his face-to-face fellowship with his Father in the Spirit. Our life of prayer is grounded in Jesus' own life of prayer with his Father so that he offers the things of the Father to us in the Spirit, and offers our prayers to the Father in the Spirit. When we cannot pray, for our hearts are too broken, Jesus prays for us and the Spirit intercedes for us, already knowing what is in our hearts which so yearns to be spoken.

This offers us great comfort in times when we find it hard to rejoice, pray, or give thanks, even though we know this is God's will for us. Our faith isn't in our ability to hang in there and do what is needed in our relationship with God. Rather our faith is in the One who is faithful and will do all that is needed to sanctify us and keep us blameless before God. We can rest in him and trust in his perfect love and grace. What a precious gift!

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Dear Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thank you for holding us in the center of your love and grace. As we go through this Advent season, remind us anew of your compassion and tender love, and fill our hearts with joy and gratitude so we may do your will. Blessed Jesus and Holy Spirit, let your prayers fill our hearts, not just for ourselves, but for all those you bring to our minds, that we may fellowship with you and one another as a communion of faith throughout this sacred Advent season. For our Father's glory, through Jesus and by your Spirit. Amen.

“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 NASB