

The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Church in the Greek city of Thessalonica. At the end of this letter we read: **“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”**

Now we might say, “Easy for you to say. I’m sure life was smooth sailing for Paul and the Church in Thessalonica. In our modern day, it feels as though the world has been turned upside down. Many are uneasy. People are worried. Depression, anxiety, and sadness are all around us.”

But that’s simply not the case. Paul and the church in Thessalonica faced many hardships. They were under persecution. After only three weeks there, enemies leveled the accusation that Paul and Silas, his compatriot, were turning the world upside down. Paul and Silas had to escape the town under the cover of night, and the Church in Thessalonica also faced similar persecutions.

Paul and his peers had a difficult life, yet he says “Rejoice!” What’s the secret to Paul’s success? How can you too rejoice? **CHRISTIANS REJOICE ALWAYS BECAUSE OF WHAT JESUS DID, DOES, AND WILL DO FOR THEM.**

First, I. Christians rejoice because of what Jesus did for them. Paul’s joy is grounded in the reality of the good news of Jesus. But the good news of Jesus, the Gospel, makes no sense unless you hear the bad news.

The bad news is that humanity is born sinful. That is, we make mistakes. We are self-centered. We do things to hurt others. We live as though we mattered most and that God doesn’t matter. Yet a holy and perfect God demands perfection and holiness. In our sinful state we cannot please God, our Heavenly Father. There’s nothing we can do to earn heaven or eternal life.

The guy who wrote this letter is the Apostle Paul. Yet the apostle Paul wasn’t always the apostle Paul. He was once Saul, a Jew who thought he followed all the rules. He was like one of those classmates in school who always arrived on time, had perfect attendance, and was the first to raise his hand with the right answer. Saul was so religious, so good at following the rules that it wasn’t enough just to follow the rules, he had to persecute others who weren’t as holy as he. Saul was on his way to Damascus to round up some Christians to send off to prison.

But Saul ran into someone on the way. He saw a blinding light and heard the voice of Jesus saying, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me.”** After being blinded for three days, the scales fell from his eyes. He regained his sight, but he gained something more than just sight.

He heard the good news of Jesus: the Gospel. And the Gospel is this: that although you were born in sin, God had a plan to rescue you. It doesn’t matter if you’re a goody two shoes or the scum of the earth, what you’ve done doesn’t matter in God’s eyes. Saul turned Paul learned this the hard way, you can’t earn

salvation by what you've done. Paul's old way of life of trying to store up good work points was like trying to collect monopoly money to spend at a grocery store. The clerk would laugh you out the door.

The Gospel is knowing that your sins have been washed away, but where is away? Those sins were washed onto Jesus' back. Every one of your failures, mistakes, and sins was carried by Jesus to Calvary's hill. He was born on Christmas so that He could live a perfect life and die for you. Jesus who is true God and true man, suffered for your sins in your place.

In its place, the Lord has given you His righteousness, His perfection, and His love, so that you will never be alone. You will always be accepted. You are highly valued by the Lord who made Heaven and Earth. Paul's world was turned upside down because of that. So too, Christians throughout the ages have had their lives changed by this message which is grounded in the truth of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. That's certainly something to be rejoice over!

How do you receive this gift? What must I do to be saved? Take it from the Apostle Paul who said elsewhere, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”** Simply believe, and all this is yours. Believe that Jesus came to die for you. Through the eyes of faith see Jesus hanging there on the cross for *your* sins. Believe in Jesus who burst from the tomb to prepare a place for you in eternal life. All of this is a free gift of God. The joy of the Christian is grounded in what Jesus did for them. But it doesn't stop there. II. Christians rejoice because of what Jesus does for them.

A married couple was having a rough patch in their marriage, and they went to see a counselor. The wife was sobbing saying, “My husband hardly talks to me. He's never even said, ‘I love you.’”

At that point the husband chimed in saying, “Abby, that's not true, and I've made my position very clear!”

“Oh yeah? What's that?” She replied.

He said, “On the day we got married I told you, ‘I love you.’”

The wife shouted, “That was decades ago, we just celebrated our 23rd wedding anniversary!”

The husband concluded matter-of-factly, “I also said on our wedding day, ‘If anything changes, I'll let you know.’ So far, nothing has changed!”

Jesus' suffering, death, and crucifixion is your Heavenly Father's ultimate “I love you.” It is a once and for all kind of deal. But unlike that dim-witted husband in our story, God knows to say “I love you” more than once.

Like that not so smart husband, we can get confused. We can get tricked into thinking that going to church is a chore like washing the dishes or snaking the bathtub drain. We gotta go to church to get God off of our back or if not God, then

at least grandma. God might not make us shake in our boots, but grandma can move mountains with just a disapproving glance.

But God is the one serving you in the church service. The church service is the primary place where your Heavenly Father says, “I love you.” In the church service is the primary place where Jesus the groom of the Church expresses His care for His redeemed Christians. He says, “I love you” through the proclamation of forgiveness often from the very mouth of the pastor as God’s representative. He says, “I love you” in the Bible read to you which is chock full of His promises. He says, “I love you” through the waters of Baptism. He says, “I love you” through delivering you His body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink.

God’s love for you in Christ Jesus isn’t confined to these four walls on a Sunday morning. In this modern era, the Bible is easily accessible at your fingertips. Anyone with a smartphone and the Internet can read the Bible for free. Any church will give you a Bible for free translated into your language. The Bible isn’t a list of rules, it is God’s love letter to you. It is overflowing with blessings that your Heavenly Father is showering upon you daily.

Paul continues in 1 Thessalonians: **“pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”** Jesus gives you the gift of prayer. That is, the king of the universe promises to hear you when you pray, and He will respond to your requests. The answer may not always be yes, but He will always answer with the response that is best for you. What a blessing it is not only for the King to say, “I love you,” but that He promises to listen to us.

All of this Paul knew. He knew that Jesus didn’t just write him a blank check to cash at a later date. He knew that being a Christian wasn’t just about where you went to church once. Paul was able to rejoice even in hard circumstances knowing that Jesus walked with Him all the way through these concrete and tangible means just mentioned earlier.

III. Christians rejoice because of what Jesus will do for them. How do we rejoice always as Christians? Paul concludes: **“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”**

Paul is able to be joyful in difficult circumstances because He keeps the big picture in mind. The big picture is that the Gospel means not only did Jesus die for your sins, not only does He find ways to say I love you through His Word and Sacrament, but He will take His believers to be with Him in heaven.

Why does God let you into His heaven? Because you trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, not because of how good of a person you are. Just as Jesus rose

from the dead on the third day, Jesus will also raise you up to be with Him and believers in Him will be judged on the basis of His works, not on the basis of theirs, thank goodness!

When Christ raises us from the dead, there will be no sickness, no pain, and no sin. There will be no more death, no more sadness, and no more loneliness. Everything will be perfect.

Paul kept his eyes to the prize in the midst of hardships, and it paid off as he was able to suffer persecution, torture, and rejection with that greater goal in mind. And from that he could rejoice, and so we can also.

And so let us keep our eyes on the prize as Christians, and doing those things which help strengthen our faith in the God who loves us: hearing God's Word, learning it in Bible class, receiving forgiveness, praying, and receiving Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. We live this way knowing that He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it. Amen.