

1Thessalonians 3:9-13 ⁹ For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹ Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you, ¹³ so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

Christ brings us joy. He pours it upon us and all around us. Or at least he gives us the opportunity to be joyful. Why then are we so often not joyful? Why then are we so often unhappy, angry, disappointed, or distressed? Could it be that we simply don't recognize those opportunities? We are looking around for presents and ice cream to make us happy. We are looking right past those opportunities in which Christ gives us joy. Take a look at what brings Paul joy in our text

1. Rejoicing in God's grace to others

For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,

Paul begins pretty normally enough, "I can't thank you enough." I'm sure there are times when most of us have uttered these words. Maybe a young woman is stuck in a ditch with a crying kid in the backseat and someone stops to pull her out. She responds, "I can't thank you enough."

But what is Paul expressing thanks to God for? Simply that the Thessalonians came to faith. It's not even that they gave some joy to Paul. He doesn't say "I thank my God for all the joy that you have given to us." But what does he say? For "all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake."

Paul's thankfulness is 100% concerned with what God had done for them not at all with what God has done for him.

Let's rethink our analogy a bit and make it more closely related with the thought Paul is expressing. A young woman was driving on a snowy day with her two your children in the back seat. She hits a patch of ice and slides into the ditch. Her children were crying and getting cold when a man with a tow truck stopped by and pulled her back on to the road. As he was pulling her out another man who happened to be driving by, stopped and said to the tow truck driver, "I can't thank you enough for pulling her out of the ditch." The young woman looked at him perplexed. Do I know you. "No," said the other man,"but I'm just so thankful that this man was here to pull you out of the ditch. It fills me with joy to see what he did for you."

One of the reasons we fail to see how much we have to be thankful for is because we are looking only at ourselves and our lives instead of looking around for all that God has poured out on all people. It's like it's raining outside and you look only at the little sliver of water in your rain gauge. That isn't that much but if you look out over the whole field, you can see God's grace filling the sky

We can see much more of God's grace in Christ, when we stop looking only at what He might or might not be doing in my life and instead look at what He is doing for others. Rejoicing that God is so gracious that he fills not just me but so many others with His grace.

2. That we might be able to serve others

¹⁰ night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?

The second thing that brings Paul great joy is the thought of seeing them face to face. Paul earnestly fervently prays night and day that he might see them face to face. But why? Again the reason that Paul wants to see them face to face is a little different from the reasons we might want to see someone face to face. We fervently desire to see people again, because they are our family, because they are someone who really makes us laugh or feel good about ourselves, someone we are really close to. Why does Paul want to see these people face to face? Because then he will be able to do something to help them out.

Paul is saying, "Well you have to be lacking in something. There has to be something you need help with. There has to be something I can do for you. And I want to help you out. That is what gives me joy." Whatever is lacking in your faith, whatever encouragement or comfort you need as you walk with God. I want to be there to help you out with that."

Another reason we fail to learn how to rejoice in the Lord is because we simply don't recognize the opportunities for joy that the Lord places before us. We think that joy comes from doing things for myself or others doing things for me. God knows that the greater joy is sacrificing ourselves for others.

In our gospel reading today Jesus road into Jerusalem not for himself but for us. Heb 12:2 NKJ "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame." There was nothing joyful at the time in His suffering and death. But afterwards he rejoices in what he has done for us.

One of the things that we are not very good at is learning to pray. When was the last time you included in your prayers that the Lord would provide you with opportunity to help others. When was the last time you "prayed exceedingly night and day" that you might have an opportunity to help out someone else. Most of the time you don't have to go anywhere to find these opportunities. Like Adam and

Lucas you can go to Africa and that's great to have that opportunity but start with your spouse, your parents, your children, your brothers and sisters.

Eph 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

That is a beautiful picture. God has purposely placed opportunities to help others, opportunities for joyous service all around us. We just need Him to open our eyes to see them. And open our hearts to give us the strength to do them.

This is how Paul continues asking that the Lord would give strength to the Thessalonians.

3. Keeping our eyes and heart focused on Christ

¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you, ¹³ so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

Finally Paul rejoices because he has his eyes firmly fixed always at all times on Jesus and the Salvation which is ours through his death and resurrection.

When we lose this focus we lose the joy which is ours in Christ Jesus.

There is no doubt that we are mostly spoiled. We grow up with riches such as the world has never known. And for that reason we take them for granted. We think we have a right to them. We think they aren't such a big deal.

Many of us are spoiled spiritually as well as physically. We've grown up with the forgiveness of Christ and have never known what it was to live in doubt and fear of our sins.

Paul knew what it was to be without the grace of God. He was never one to take Christ's forgiveness for granted. He was more than willing to live in dungeons and go without food, to be beaten and condemned, all that meant nothing to him as long as he had the forgiveness of Christ and was able to look forward to that salvation.

Knowing that Christ rode on a donkey into Jerusalem, knowing that Christ continued on into death for the forgiveness of his sins, these are the things that gave him JOY in his life and in every situation.

Amen