

Rejoice in the Lord

May 29th, 2016, Okinawa Gospel Meeting
 Gotthold Beck

主にあって喜べ
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1 Thessalonians

5:16 "Always be joyful.

5:17 Continually be prayerful.

5:18 In everything be thankful, because this is
 God's will for you in the Messiah Jesus."

[International Standard Version]

It was a blessing that I could come back here today. I desperately wanted to see my dear brother Shouji and sister Nobuko again. Our Lord is so great. He is wonderful. He is so great that He is beyond expression in words. We came to know this Lord, which is by itself a grace.

It did not happen because we asked for it but because the Lord wanted us to. Every time I come to Okinawa, I recall one person. The older people will all remember her very well. However, the younger people may not know her. She is sister Kimiko Oshiro whom I respected wholeheartedly.

This sister was called away to the Lord when she was 94 years-old. She never sought respect from others, instead, she always wanted Jesus to stay at the center of everything. This was the heartfelt desire of this sister. Let me read out her testimony.

"I praise the name of the Lord. I am still in good shape. But, the time of my departure may come anytime soon and I would like to leave my last words for you. Psalms 23, 'Even when I walk through a valley of deep darkness, I will not be afraid because you are with me.' This is exactly how I feel now at this moment."

"And 'my cup overflows.' How encouraging these words are! It is Jesus who led me so that I feel the same way. I am so grateful for His guidance. What a wonderful life this is which Jesus always keeps together. I am filled with joy, peace, and hope of having such life. So, I have nothing to worry about at all now. I have no anxiety. I am very happy about leaving for heaven."

"I will remain in the Lord's temple forever. I am so grateful to the Lord Jesus from the bottom of my heart. Kimiko Oshiro."

She testified this way. I am looking forward to seeing her again. It will be in a little while. We will be with Jesus forever, after all. This is unimaginable. This might be beyond our imagination, but we can be assured because it is promised to us.

Today, I would like to discuss with you, these verses from the first epistle to the Thessalonians. For those who have encountered Jesus, the desperate desire is to let others come to know Him empirically and have them accept the forgiveness presented to them. It is also to convince them that they too have eternal life, isn't it?

What is the purpose of this meeting? As always, it is held for the purpose of introducing Jesus to the people. Jesus is incomparable to anyone. There is something more important than considering what we should believe in or what we are supposed to do. What we should always keep in mind is how great and wonderful Jesus is.

Jesus is almighty and it is so wonderful for us to renew our decisions to rely on the Lord. In fact, life without Jesus is worthless and meaningless indeed. It is because Jesus is the only one who provides us with something truly eternal.

It is because He is the one who has the strength to give us true satisfaction and solve all problems. In this sense, this meeting today can be called the gathering of joy. Why? Because we are given an opportunity to repent in here. All we need to do is to humble ourselves and everything will be well.

Many people believe that the Bible is very difficult, and it is hard to understand. But, that is not true. All you need to do is to humble yourself and everything will be fine. Period. This is what the Bible wants to tell you. Regardless of whether you understand the Bible or not, if you just humble yourself saying, "Lord, I am sorry" and if you always have an attitude like this, it is enough to make the Lord happy.

In this sense, our gathering today can be regarded as a celebration to admire the sincerity of Jesus. Jesus has promised, "I will never leave you or abandon you." This is why we can reassure our belief in the promises of the Lord and fully entrust everything to Him peacefully.

The Lord would never fail to keep His promises. Our only desire is in Jesus, and He should be given the highest priority in our lives. Let us read these verses again.

1 Thessalonians

5:16 "Always be joyful.
 5:17 Continually be prayerful.
 5:18 In everything be thankful, because this is
 God's will for you in the Messiah Jesus."

What is God's will for us? It is written in these verses. We all want to be happy because otherwise, our lives will be so unpleasant and meaningless.

1 Thessalonians
 5:18 " ...this is God's will for you in the Messiah
 Jesus."

Then, what is it that the Lord God wants from us and what is His will for us? Needless to say, it is not to belong to some Christian organization or to believe in any specific teachings or to rely on our own knowledge or strength to become good human beings. The demands of the Lord God, the requests of the Lord God can be summarized into these three things we just read.

Firstly, He wants us to always be joyful. It is not sometimes. It is not every other day. But always. In the Old Testament, the importance of rejoicing is mentioned 358 times, 133 times in the New Testament and 491 in both Testaments combined. Of course, the most important phrase here is "in the Messiah Jesus".

That is to say, the secret to obtaining this joy that nobody can deprive us of lies in knowing Jesus. By knowing Jesus and having vibrant fellowship with Him, all kinds of flawed human thoughts, including solitude, arrogance, egotism and self-seeking, innocuous self-pity, desperation, and all worries will disappear.

On the other hand, it gives us true joy, peace, and satisfaction. Jesus came down to this world to give us true salvation, which is the forgiveness of our sins. He paid the price for salvation with His own life for us.

We try to comprehend the fact that Jesus came to give us true salvation, that is to say, the forgiveness of our sins, but we can't. It is far beyond our understanding. Why did He do that? We cannot answer. To know Jesus through the experience is to obtain eternal life.

It is in the fellowship with Jesus that we can find the source of true joy, constant delight, and hope. In simpler words, Jesus changes all sorrow to joy. Jesus changes the burden of your job to joy. Through Jesus, the weary are given new strength. Through Him, the emptiness of all human effort and frustration is changed to perfect peace and a sense of reassurance.

The fountain of true joy is Jesus Himself. When Jesus came down to this earth, the holy angels said, "Stop

being afraid! I am bringing you good news of great new strength for all the people. Your Savior, the Lord Messiah, is born" (Luke 2:10).

Without never-changing joy, our lives will be heavy and depressing. Without never-changing joy, our lives will be so boring. The wonderful joy provided through the Bible that consists of the words of the Lord is far more important than mere pleasure, delight, relish or temporary relief from your problems.

The wonderful joy that is provided through the Bible makes us feel everlasting joy, everlasting happiness from the bottom of our hearts. It leads us to perfect peace and strengthens our conviction that we are completely protected in the hands of the Father God.

The Bible says, "Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus because he is the one who will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). What is absolutely necessary for all humans is for them to obtain forgiveness for their sins.

Because it is not until our sins are forgiven that fellowship with the Lord God is allowed. And men can be satisfied and fulfilled by nothing but fellowship with the Father God. The foundation of joy that no one can deprive us of is in the forgiveness of sins. Sin is a barrier that separates humans from the true God.

However, by the sacrifice of Jesus, by the sacrificial death of Jesus, the wall that divided humans and God was torn down. Without the one who sacrificed Himself, without the death of this innocent man, there would have been no way of salvation and forgiveness of our sins, so states the Bible clearly.

When Jesus died on the cross, the Lord died on behalf of each one of us. That is to say, the death of Jesus was the punishment and judgment for sins of humans. When all sins were punished by the death of Jesus, then the sacred Lord God could forgive our sins.

Actually, He wants to forgive us desperately and He is waiting for us to ask for it. Those who believe in the promise of the Lord God will be saved. Consequently, their sins will be forgiven, and they will be granted the peace with God and eternal life. And this exactly is the source of true joy; the joy that no one can deprive us of.

To summarize, everlasting joy can be found not in ourselves, not in our possessions or circumstances, but it is in Jesus Himself alone. The fact that we are allowed to be connected to Jesus is itself true joy. All other kinds of worldly joy are temporal. These won't last forever.

It is written, "always be joyful." Why do we have to? This is exactly the intention of the Lord and what the Lord wants from us. Sorrow, disappointment or a sense of defeat are not allowed anymore. The Lord strictly tells us that we ought to remain joyful. It is a sin, after all, to show a disobedient attitude against this command of the Lord.

Secondly, we are supposed to continually be prayerful. It is most important for us to pray. The life of those who refuse to pray is so miserable and pitiful. Those who don't pray have no joy, bear no fruit and cannot be used by the Lord.

Why are so many people devastated? It is because they barely pray or hardly seek help at all. Why do they have to be defeated all the time? It is because they seldom pray or their prayer is not enough. Why are only a few people brought into the light of the Lord from darkness? It is because they seldom pray or they pray too little.

I guess that we all will regret when we get to heaven. Why didn't we pray more while we were alive? The Lord wanted to work on us. He was willing to give us grace, but He couldn't. Because we did not pray enough.

He is the one who can do anything and is still almighty. Just like He used to, He still is wholeheartedly willing to save men. That is to say, the Lord's hand is not too short to save. The Lord can save anyone.

I guess that all failures arise fundamentally because of insufficient prayers in our lives. With prayers, we can benefit from the strength of the Lord Almighty. That is to say, when we pray, the Lord Almighty works. He performs His miracles. It is always sincere prayers that help their fruits to last.

What is the purpose of our lives? It should be neither knowledge, strength nor honour but an eternal fruit. And a branch bears such fruit only when it is connected to the vine, which is Jesus. If we are not connected to the Lord and if we don't strive to live a life of prayers, we won't bear fruits that will last long.

"Continually be prayerful." This is what the Lord wants from us. Let us accept the grace of the Lord and become people of prayers. Then, we will make a difference. Our family members and friends will change too.

In order to continually be prayerful, we need to avoid self-centred behaviour and instead, to rely on the Lord. Relying on the Lord is a wonderful privilege given to

us, isn't it? Whether we pray or not is not trivial for us. It is a command from the Lord to be continually prayerful and seek for His help. And, it is a sin not to obey His command.

Finally, the third point is to be thankful in everything. If we are told to "rejoice once in a while" or to "rejoice when you are attending the gathering of joy," it may be somewhat doable. But the Lord's command to us is to always be joyful.

If we are required to "pray occasionally at least every morning and night," we will all be willing to do so. But the Lord is telling us to "continually be prayerful."

Now, if we are told to be thankful to something specific, it is easy for anyone to agree and say "okay, okay, I am thankful to it." However, the Lord commands us to be thankful in "everything," not some things.

"In everything be thankful." It says "everything." Through everything, we should strive to understand the Lord better. Understanding Jesus better is more valuable than anything else. So, let us never forget to sincerely appreciate all things in life.

Do we truly think that it is possible to always be joyful, continually be prayerful and be thankful in everything? Actually, we can't. It is absolutely impossible for anyone.

Still, many people believe that the commandments in the Bible are written to be followed. This is not true. They were not given for us to follow but to be broken so that we realize how miserable we are. It helps us to truly and thoroughly rely on the Lord alone.

Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 5:5). Apart from Jesus, we can neither have the joy that nobody can deprive us of nor continually be prayerful nor be thankful in everything.

Many people believe that the commandments in the Bible are given to us to be followed. They are not. They are given to us to be broken. If we can follow them all, we do not need Jesus. We try to follow the commandments in our own efforts. We try harder and harder, but it only leaves us exhausted. It is just meaningless. We should stop such efforts now. After all, when we totally surrender and continue to beg Him, "I give up. Please have mercy on me. I entrust everything to you," the Lord begins to work on us.

It is described in chapter 15 of John that, "Jesus himself is the true vine and we are the branches." Branches bear a lot of fruit when the trunk of the tree

provides strength to them. The trunk of the vine is filled with strength and life.

And Jesus has promised, "The one who abides in me while I abide in him produces much fruit." Apart from Jesus, we are not able to believe, pray, repent, love or thank in the true sense. It is not possible at all. This is exactly what Jesus said and Jesus never exaggerates when He speaks.

We all should confess now. Although we understand very well what the Lord wants from us, it is not just difficult but impossible for us to follow it. It is totally unachievable. So, why don't we rely on the one who can do anything? Because we are all so miserable and poor, we rely on the Lord Almighty.

To rely on the Lord, to depend on the Lord is to be connected to the fountain. What we are supposed to learn through our lives of faith is the same as what Peter had to go through. I will finish this sermon with this verse.

John

21:18 "Truly, I tell you emphatically, when you were young, you would fasten your belt and go wherever you liked. But when you get old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten your belt and take you where you don't want to go."

Total reliance on the Lord is the secret to bearing fruit and to leading a life of faith filled with blessings. To totally rely on the Lord Jesus is by itself the true liberation for us.

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