



From Coping to Cure

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LESSON 16:

ANYONE WHO TALKS ABOUT "REJOICING ALWAYS" JUST DOESN'T UNDERSTAND THE REAL SITUATION

THOUGHT STARTER:

Turning everything over to God and letting Him control the situation is humanly impossible—and a fun experience.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NKJV

Many years ago, I renewed a commitment to serve the Lord as my top priority. I was reading Psalm 1 and the first word, *blessed*, caught my attention. What does that mean? The concordances and dictionaries that I consulted said that blessed means "cheerful, calmly happy, or well off." I knew I was a candidate for that. Verse 2 gave one characteristic of this blessed person:

His delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. (Psalm 1:2, KJV)

That struck me as a very tall order in that the law of the Lord is contained in a very thick book called the Bible. And how does one meditate day and night?

At the time, it was basketball season and I loved basketball. I read about the game; I watched it, talked about it, and followed the careers of certain players. Basketball was well ingrained in the background of my thinking.

It was also very satisfying to play the game in my younger days. I memorized all the rules of basketball because I couldn't play successfully if they were not part of my subconscious thinking. I didn't have time in the middle of a game to say, "Now, what was that rule about standing in the key too long?"

Living is like that also. If we wait until the actual event, God's laws governing that situation in life will not be part of our background thinking and we will often end up

making a wrong decision. We need to be ready with God's law in our subconscious so we don't end up with regrets after the fact. If the law is to be in the background of our thinking, we must first of all have portions of it in our minds.

REJOICE ALWAYS

Since memorizing is not one of my strengths, I looked for an easy verse to get started with. "Rejoice always" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). My goal was to spend two weeks with this verse in the background of my thinking. This meant that "joy, delight, great gladness, emotion of keen or lively pleasure arising from present or expected good" needed to be in me always.

Always? These were my first responses: You've got to be kidding. Who wants to be that joyful? Should anyone be that joyful? Is it even appropriate? What about a death in the family? Discovery that a child is on drugs? Your partner is in an adulterous relationship? Job loss? Investment wiped out? Addressed rudely? Injured in an accident? Neglected or criticized? Beaten or abused?

You can add to this list. Life doesn't happen the way you want it to.

While thinking about this verse over a period of two weeks, I did not succeed once in rejoicing for a full twenty-four hour period. One day during this period, I was disgusted and dreading the day *even* before I got out of bed. (Have you ever awakened in the morning saying, "Oh no, I woke up! Must I get out of bed?")

Can one enjoy facing a crisis? I've often thought that joy is on the other side of a difficult problem and that joy only comes with a solution. This verse suggested, however, that one can joyfully work toward a solution.

I concluded that this is not humanly possible. To rejoice always requires a miracle: not just an ordinary one, but a full-blown, supernatural miracle.

The Bible says that joy is a fruit of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22). This is a condition of the heart that occurs at any given time when one consciously recognizes the impossibility of human achievement of joy, and as an act of the will, yields to the joy of the *Lord*. The miracle then follows.

My friend Sue lived in Nairobi, East Africa, when she received word that her brother had died suddenly. She decided to go to California to be with her sister-in-law and attend a memorial service for him. The trip from Nairobi to Los Angeles was a long, demanding journey and she realized that if she ever needed peace and joy, it was now.

As she started out on her long journey, she prayed for the fruit of the Spirit, peace and joy, to be her companion.

It was an uneventful trip until she arrived in Dallas. The flight from Dallas to Los Angeles was overbooked and she found herself on the waiting list. One by one names were called and she watched the passengers go on board.

It occurred to her that she might not get on this flight, which meant she would miss the memorial service. Because she had prayed that she would get there in time for the service, it never occurred to her that she would miss it after traveling ten thousand miles. The thought crept into her mind that if she were to enjoy this moment, it would have to be in Dallas, wait-listed, and likely to miss the plane.

In fact, she did miss the plane. Only a miracle could give her joy in her heart in this situation, and she needed it now more than ever. At this point she could enjoy making the best of the predicament, or she could be unhappy and bitter. Either way, she was stuck in Dallas.

She chose to ask the Lord to fill her with His joy and God responded to her request. She has the same option every day. We all do.

The second verse I chose to work on was a bit more difficult—three words:

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NKJV)

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

A friend was driving me to the Atlanta airport. I was sharing with him my experience with the verse, "Pray without ceasing" plus "Rejoice always." It was 4:00 p.m. and up to then I had enjoyed the day. It had turned out as I had prayed.

We arrived at the airport early so we sat in the car and talked a while. I said good-bye to my friend, entered the airport, and presented my ticket to the attendant at the desk. My destination was Asheville, where I was to speak at a nearby conference center that night. The attendant informed me that the flight had just left, and there were no more flights to Asheville until morning. I was stunned. My watch showed plenty of time: my watch had stopped!

I quickly called the center in Asheville and told them what had happened. They had already dispatched a driver to drive sixty miles to pick me up: He would surely need some joy when he discovered I was not there (this was in a time before cell phones). And as for me, I ended up praying and rejoicing all alone in a motel room in Atlanta.

The evening alone was enjoyable. God gave me no clue as to why this happened. He was silent. Yet, this was a rare day when I trusted and rejoiced all day.

The next morning I was at the airport bright and early. The plane was scheduled to arrive in time for me to easily make my speech in Asheville at 11:00 a.m. As I waited for

the plane to load, I rehearsed my two Bible verses: "Rejoice always," plus "Pray without ceasing." The plane was full and took off on time. It was only a half hour flight, and soon we felt the plane head downward. What a good feeling. Then we felt the plane head up again. The speaker system came on: "This is the captain speaking. I regret to tell you that there is fog in Asheville; we are going to land in Johnson City."

With that announcement, one could hear murmuring throughout the airplane. Most of the polite, nicely dressed passengers became visibly unhappy. One well-groomed man bawled out the flight attendant because there was fog in Asheville.

I was rehearsing my verses and, strangely enough, contentedly watching God work. We landed in Johnson City. Our planeload of mostly disgusted passengers descended on a hapless ticket agent behind the counter who had just heard the bad news himself. One nice looking man banged his fist on the counter and moaned, "I want to get to Asheville."

As for me, I ran to a phone to call the Center to tell them I wouldn't be there at 11:00 a.m. Unfortunately, the poor driver who was to meet me last night had already left for the Asheville airport. For the second time, the conference director had no speaker. The men at the Conference Center and the driver needed a good supply of trust and joy for this day also.

Meanwhile, Henry Brandt was rehearsing his verses: "Pray without ceasing," plus "Rejoice always." The ticket agent behind the counter looked quite harried. I felt sorry for him, so I went up to him and told him I was also a passenger. I encouraged him to process me last and I would hover in the background and give him moral support. He looked at me as though I was drunk. What was a cheerful, relaxed, supportive person doing here?

It took an hour and a half for the agent to line up micro-busses to transport us to Asheville. One by one the busses left with a load of disgruntled passengers. I was the only one left. He motioned me forward and said, "I'm sorry, I'm out of busses. But I do have a limousine out there, and if you don't mind, I will send you to Asheville in it." "I don't mind," I said. We went outside and there sat a long, black Chrysler limousine. I sat in the back seat and motioned the chauffeur to proceed. Soon we caught up to the first bus. I waved happily as we passed.

That is the way it goes. Sometimes the day turns out as we had planned. Often it doesn't.

Prayer is just talking to God with our mouth or with our heart. How is it possible to pray without ceasing? Does this mean that one stops doing everything else and just continuously talks to God? What would you talk about? Do you ignore your family and friends? What about going to work and interacting with the people there? Going shopping? Going visiting? This verse surely can't mean what it says.

I can commit my day into God's hands. I can tell him what I want to have happen. I can compare what happens with what my requests were. Then whatever happens, I can depend on a living God to look after me and I can trust Him to give me a day's supply of joy. Life may not always make sense, but I can always trust Him.

It is never dull talking with God because his plans are always different and better than ours:

This plan of mine is not what you would work out, neither are my thoughts the same as yours! For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than yours, and my thoughts than yours. (Isaiah 55:8-9, LB)

The third verse I chose to work on had four words in it:

In everything give thanks. (1 Thessalonians 5:18, NKJV)

In everything? When your car won't start? Tire is flat? Your partner is fifteen minutes late? You are being ignored at home?

GIVE THANKS IN EVERYTHING

I was asked to speak in Mombasa, a city on Kenya's Indian Ocean coast. My sponsor and his wife were named Justice and Jemima. They met me at the airport and seemed to glow with appreciation as we greeted each other. As we drove toward the hotel, he remarked that he was so thankful that a friend from another mission had loaned them this car. Justice's car was broken down and he could not afford to fix it.

He was pleased to tell me that a local Baptist congregation had made their church auditorium available. It was the best location in town, easily accessible from all directions. He added that very few people owned cars so they must get where they're going by bus.

About one hundred and fifty people were already there. The mood of the people before the meeting was congenial and friendly. The host pastor greeted us gladly. Justice was elated at the turnout for the response was beyond his expectations. The audience's reception of the material was positive. Many of them approached me to express their thanks for my coming. I might add that the meeting was from 5:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. so those in attendance could catch their buses before dark.

For this to make any sense to you, some background information might help. Outside, it was about 110 degrees. The humidity was as high as it could get. The church was located on as busy a corner as you could imagine and also a heavy truck route. When the signal light on the corner changed, the trucks revved up their engines to get going again. Cars tooted their horns frequently.

When the church was built ten years before, this was a quiet spot. The business area of the city grew in that direction, and now the church was surrounded by buildings, with the heavy traffic going by.

With no air-conditioning, all doors and windows were wide open to catch any movement of air that might relieve the intense heat and humidity. As I spoke to the people, the sweat poured down my face, into my eyes, and downward all over my body. The faces of people in the audience glistened with sweat. The church's public address system was turned as high as possible above the roar of the heavy traffic.

Next door was a Moslem temple. At 6:00 p.m., their public address system issued a call to prayer that could be heard for blocks. For a minute and a half, I had to compete with a Moslem call to prayer.

All this bedlam around us—and in this setting dozens of people expressed their thanks for a convenient location and a public address system that was louder than the traffic noise.

These people taught me that one can have a grateful, thankful heart in a setting where the body is struggling with heat and high humidity, where the eardrums are taxed to the limit trying to block out deafening noise and at the same time trying to listen to a speaker. Here, funds are limited and clothing is scarce. Medical attention is almost nonexistent; education hard to come by; money is precious. Housing is substandard, according to our definition of substandard.

None of these conditions kept these people from turning their hearts Godward and opening their ears to hear from Him. If they were to have hearts filled with gratitude and appreciation and thankfulness on this day, it had to be under present conditions. They could be discontentedly complaining about the present and dwell on what might have been or what could be in the future.

Surely these people would like a better life-style. They work toward improvement like anyone else. As I think about them, I am reminded of these words:

A truly spirited Christian is a paradox in that he is always satisfied, yet ever seeking. He never thirsts, yet is always thirsting. He is perfectly content, yet always wanting more. He enjoys to the full what he possesses but knows there is more beyond and eagerly longs for it.¹

The famous prayer of St. Francis of Assisi has inspired many of us:

God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.

I have had wealthy clients who are very discontent that they don't have more. Then there are those like my friends in Kenya that are so thankful for very simple things. Our response of trust to God in terms of what we have is an excellent indicator of our walk with God.

I have seen in my own life that I need to stand with open hands before God. He can put into my hand or He can take out of my hand whatever He wants. This includes loved ones, finances, possessions, health—anything. Sometimes it is painful, but I know He loves me and I can trust Him.

God loves us and wants our hearts to be satisfied with Him:

**I have learned the secret of contentment in every situation, whether it be a full stomach or hunger, plenty or want; for I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power.
(Philippians 4:12-13, LB)**

He also wants us to appreciate everything that He has given us now, even the difficulties, because they are there for a purpose that is for our good:

**In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
(1 Thessalonians 5:18, NKJV)**

<p><i>Lesson: When we allow God to work out His plan for our lives, joy and thanksgiving will be measured in our hearts.</i></p>

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
 - Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
 - What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?
1. Would you say there are circumstances when joy would be an inappropriate response?
 2. What is keeping you from experiencing joy right now?
 3. How is it possible to pray without ceasing?

4. Share with us how God handled one of your prayers.
5. Can you think of anything you do "without ceasing" in the normal course of living?
6. Read Philippians 4:12-13. Are there any instances when you learned what is described in these verses?
7. Do you face an unwanted difficulty? What is there about it to be thankful for?

¹Ruth Paxton, *Wealth, Walk, Warfare of the Christian* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1939), n.p.

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