



Thanksgiving Is Our Dialect

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1Thessalonians 5:16-18

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Six days after my husband, David, died, I was in a shoe store when a song he loved began to play. Here's just a bit of the song...

Talk about incongruity! The previous night and that morning, of course, I had wept with the pain of missing my husband. And there I was, standing in a shoe store, when this very catchy and upbeat song by Pharrell Williams, aptly called "Happy," started to play!

So, guess what I began to do in the middle of that shoe store? Or, more accurately, guess what *God* did in me? I began to dance. Yup! Right there. I actually couldn't help myself. A six-day-old widow who had shed tears only a few short hours earlier, ridiculously dancing to a song...

Is a God like this for real? Can God truly meet us in our mourning, our dancing, and everything in between? My answer, and I pray an answer you can join me in, is a resounding YES!

A few foundational Scriptures might help us as we begin:

"It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

"The joy of the LORD is our strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

"You have turned my mourning into dancing; You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy" (Psalm 30:11).

Last Sunday Pastor Stan talked about joy. The next day, Monday, the congregation learned he was about to have major surgery! You would have never guessed that by his countenance. He embodied the Scripture: "The joy of the LORD is our strength." I'm delighted to tell you that Stan came through the surgery well, and is now home recovering.

Is this possible? Can we really live like this? Are we being foolishly naïve, or hopelessly "Pollyannaish?"

Let's rehearse the building blocks. God wants to be known. We want to know God. God gives us Scripture to reveal who God is and how we can be in relationship with God through Christ. By faith, we believe that Scripture is trustworthy, and is the *living* Word of God. So, Scripture speaks both truth and life!

If you believe this, then the question is this: What does God say, through Scripture, about how we can live from mourning to dancing?

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1Thessalonians 5:16-18).

One paraphrase sums it up like this: "Thanksgiving Is Our Dialect."

What would you say is *your* dialect? Does your dialect reveal that you are a Christ-follower in God's Kingdom?

With a little shuffling, and some abbreviation, we can take these few verses and distill them down to six words using the acronym, “ABC.”

ALWAYS REJOICE

BE THANKFUL

CEASELESSLY PRAY

At first glance, this looks like a nearly impossibly unattainable way to live. You’re right! It is! In our strength, it’s inconceivable! In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul piles up four different Greek words in rapid succession to try to convey a sense of God’s *power*. Paul says this power is what God used to raise Jesus from the dead! *This* same power is available to *us* through the Holy Spirit. When we believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in us. The Spirit is the source of our power.

So let’s start with the letter “A,” ALWAYS REJOICE.

Always? Full-on rejoicing? This biblical invitation feels overwhelming, maybe guilt-inducing, perhaps even outrageous. Why? So often, our happiness is contingent upon our human circumstances. Our moods, our outlooks, our attitudes can and do fluctuate depending upon what’s occurring in our lives.

God has something entirely different in mind for us! God has *joy* in mind. *Joy* can be ever flowing because the *reason* for our joy is found in the person of Jesus Christ. And he does not, cannot change! In fact, Scripture says Jesus is the same “yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). And Jesus is going nowhere! Among his last words on earth were these: “I am with you always!”

Elisabeth Elliott, whose missionary husband was slain by the very people he was trying to reach with the Gospel, distilled this truth: “The secret is not me in a different set of circumstances. The secret is Christ-in-me.”

You may know that Pastor Rick and Kay Warren’s son tragically died by suicide some years ago. In a book she wrote years before their son’s death, Kay Warren made occasional, anonymous references to the heartache of having a loved one who suffered greatly with mental illness. Nevertheless, in the very midst of that ongoing trial, Kay wrote this definition of joy: “Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life; the quiet confidence that ultimately everything will be all right; and the determined choice to praise God in all things.”

The Holy Spirit lives in you. *With resurrection power*. Will you ask the Holy Spirit to help you rejoice?

BE THANKFUL. Here’s the actual Scripture: “Give thanks *in* all circumstances.” We sometimes make a big deal about that preposition, “in.” And that makes sense. We do *not* want to thank God, for instance, *for* the pandemic. Or, think with me about the horrifying

concentration camps of World War II. No person in their right mind would give thanks *for* these wretched places, or the evil that envisioned and built them.

Two Christian Dutch sisters, Corrie and Betsie ten Boom, were sent to the notorious concentration camp, Ravensbruck, because their family had hidden and sheltered Jews. The sisters were assigned to a barracks infested with fleas. Betsie pressed her sister, Corrie, to pray prayers of thankfulness in the midst of that living hell. As Betsie thanked God even for the fleas, Corrie blew up! “I refuse to thank God for fleas!” They later learned that the sadistic guards stayed away from their barracks, freeing them to share the Gospel and to pray openly with fellow prisoners, *precisely* because of the fleas.

To be thankful is a choice. It’s a spiritual discipline. It’s a practice in which we can all grow. Sometimes I wake up to a grey sky, a spirit of heaviness, and a soul that is not at rest in Jesus. On those mornings, I “make” myself do something. I pull out this journal, and I “force” myself to make a gratitude list. God meets me. Gently turns me. And I begin again.

A sister in Christ whom I’ve known for almost 30 years has this on the bottom of her email signature: “What if you woke up today with only the things you thanked God for yesterday?”

Will you choose to gladden God’s heart by living as a person of ever-increasing thankfulness? What is one action step you can and will take?

ABC. Always rejoice. Be thankful. Ceaselessly pray.

All right. You might have been at least somewhat on board with the first two. We can work towards more rejoicing, more thankfulness. But praying ceaselessly? Now you’ve lost me, Connie.

I think we can boil it down to this. If prayer is communicating with God ~ both input and output ~ then the key is to be as ceaselessly *aware* of God as possible. Aware. Attentive. Available.

Live your life looking for what God is doing. Then join God!

Friday morning I was driving and singing along with the worship song, “Hosanna.” I was close to the phrase, “Break my heart for what breaks Yours.” As I pulled up to a red light, there was a man standing there with a tattered cardboard sign. Immediate clarity and conviction came from the Holy Spirit: How could I possibly sincerely worship my Lord, and ignore a fellow child of God right before me? I showed him a small act of kindness.

Even more, the irony of the meaning of “Hosanna” was also not lost on me. It literally means “save now.” Oh how I **pray** I joined God ever-so-simply in being a conduit of God’s love for this broken man. To aim for ceaseless prayer is to aim for openness to, and then prompt responsiveness to whatever, to whomever God places before you. Will you leave this sanctuary attentive and available, prayerfully looking for where you can join God?

Always rejoice. Be thankful. Pray without ceasing.

I'll close with J and J: not Johnson & Johnson, or Moderna, or Pfizer, but Job and Jesus. Shortly after David died, I joined GriefShare. In the participant's guide, I came across a verse from Scripture that I read as if for the first time. You likely know Job's story. He suddenly and violently lost his 10 children, servants, massive wealth, and possessions. The verse I read in GriefShare was Job 1:20. Are you ready? "Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground *and worshiped.*" Job both lamented *and* still turned to his God *in worship*. Can you and I do this in our own strength? Absolutely, utterly impossible. *With* the indwelling *power* of the Holy Spirit, with believing faith, God can do this in our lives, too!

God took the worst our world has ever known, the death of God's one and only Son, Jesus, and from the darkness of Good Friday, gave us Easter. The women weeping at the tomb became the women who found an empty grave. They ran to tell the others that God had raised Jesus from death to life! From mourning to dancing! From weeping to rejoicing!

THIS IS OUR GOD. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Pray with me:

O Lord, our God, you are mighty! Nothing limits you! You see molehills, not mountains; you see opportunities, not hindrances; you see stepping stones, not stumbling blocks. So empower us to live! In Jesus' Name, Amen.