

Rejoice, Pray, and Give Thanks

MJCF, (Minuma – shorter) January 2, 2022

1 Thessalonians 5:15-22

As we look forward to the coming year, how do you feel? There have been many challenges in the past year. In BC, we've experienced one of the worst forest fire seasons ever, and then more recently there was the flood disaster which wiped out many farms and residences, and caused serious destruction on major roads. On top of all this, we've all had to adapt our lives in order to live safely with the continuing pandemic. In BC the number of people who are catching the deadly disease is getting worse and worse. In Japan though, thankfully, the numbers are still low.

In addition to the tension caused through fears surrounding COVID-19, many people live with economic fears. People are told to stay home as much as possible. Businesses have struggled to keep going, and many workers have lost their jobs.

But, there are also positive things that have happened. Most people have learned to connect online. This has brought people together from across the world. At, we've been worshipping regularly with Mary in Abbotsford, Ken and Masako in Calgary, Greta in Niagara, and the Kanamrus and Yoko in Japan. And now we are also able to continue joining our worship from Japan as well! In worshipping online we see each other's faces. In some ways this is better than meeting in person since you may often only see the backs of people's heads while sitting in church. Online, we can easily attend worship even if the weather is bad. Of course, we do miss a lot if we only meet online. It's tough to sing while sitting in front of a computer or a phone. It's also tough to have informal conversations with one or two others. We can't have fellowship meals. And, children have trouble meeting online. They really need the in-person interaction.

What things stand out for you from the past year? How was your walk with Jesus Christ? Did your faith grow? Did you find strength during the challenging times? Inamine san at the Minuma church in Japan suggested today's scripture passage for their first worship of the new year. It gives a good vision for how we may live in the coming year. It's also one of my favourite passages.

The apostle Paul is giving a series of instructions to the believers in Thessalonica. I'd like to focus on the first part of today's passage. As we look forward to the year ahead, it's a good time to commit to seeking the will of God through Jesus Christ. Here, Paul summarizes some of what God's will is for the Thessalonians, and this also applies to us. Starting in verse 15 he says, "always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances..." Notice how he repeats "always" – "always seek to do good", "Rejoice always", "pray without ceasing" (in other words "always"). And finally, "give thanks in all circumstances". These are not just "one-time" actions. The "always" means we need to make them a regular part of our lives. In the coming year how can we spend more time seeking the good of others rather than focusing on our own struggles? Will the year be one of rejoicing in what God has done and continues to do in our lives? How has your prayer life been in the past year? Will we be able to deepen our individual prayer times? And, of course giving thanks is another characteristic of followers of Jesus. We give thanks because we can trust him to lead us through whatever we face in life. Even if our lives were to end because of our circumstances, we will then be in the presence of God, the source of all love, joy, and peace. We need not fear evil or death. Through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the resurrection, God showed us that God's love is stronger than death itself. In Jesus Christ we have forgiveness of sin. We also see in him that God's way of love is much stronger than the way of violence and evil.

Many Christians think that we need to do big things for God, and we try to prepare to do something big and important, but God seems more concerned about how we live our lives during boring everyday life. If we are not faithful in the small things, it's hard for God to trust us with the big things. Sometimes we're called to make a big decision and take a big step of faith, but most of the time our lives involve taking small steps of faith. It's in the everyday things that our spiritual muscles are trained. In fact, God seems to work most often in slow, and small, but sustainable ways. Recently, Rie

and I came across this slogan for one organization. “Slow, small, and sustainable, with a smile.” I believe that’s how God calls us to work. We are called to be faithful in the small, seemingly insignificant things. We then need patience to see how God can use us in the long term. But, it’s often with the small faithful steps that we can continue. ‘Kind of like the turtle and the rabbit race. The rabbit, of course could run much faster, but he would often take rests and became too relaxed. In the end the slow and steady turtle wins the race while the rabbit sleeps. If we were to take only big steps of faith, we’d most likely lose energy and give up. God calls us to be faithful in the small things, often moving slowly, but faithfully, and with an underlying joy.

As Christians, we are often tempted to see rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving as things we tack on along with “working hard for God.” But, the rejoicing, prayer, and giving thanks, is our main work! The service we do for others is very important, but it must always flow out of our main work of rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving.

If I think of these three main areas that Paul says are the will of God in Christ Jesus, I have a lot of room to improve. If a stranger were to see me during the times when I’ve been struggling with a problem, what would they see? Or, if a stranger were to see us at church, what impression would he or she have? Would strangers see how we rejoice in our faith? Would they sense the depth of our prayers? Would they be surprised by how thankful we are in our lives, even as we face challenges? Personally, I can grow in all these areas. There are times when I forget to rejoice in God - when I feel tension because something is not working out, or I can’t find the answer to a problem, or I just can’t find something that I’ve lost. Have you ever been so focused on the problem in front of you that you can’t think of much else? Then, it’s the Sunday worship services, or my regular prayer times that help me refocus back on the reality of God’s presence in my life, and I can then rejoice. That kind of joy doesn’t depend on my circumstances. Nothing can change what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. And nothing can separate us from God’s love. Remembering that gives me hope and strength.

In the area of prayer, I imagine we can all grow. I try to have a regular prayer time each day, but I find that I tend end up reading devotional books much more than praying. In the coming year I hope to reduce some of my reading time, and increase my praying time. And then, giving thanks is another important area. Much like rejoicing, giving thanks is easy to forget when we struggle with problems. In our preparations and travel to Japan there were so many things that went wrong. But, I’m amazed and thankful at how God sorted out each and every challenge that we faced. Because Rie and I often prayed during our preparations to move, we sensed God’s hand in working out all the challenges. There is so much for which to be thankful. I’d like to close with a word of prayer.

Loving God, thank-you for your leading through the past year. As we begin another year, we pray that you would help us focus on the most important things rather than get distracted with our personal challenges. Teach us to pray, that we may deepen our relationship with you. Help us to live with joy and thanksgiving, remembering all you’ve done for us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.