

GIVE THANKS- IN EVERYTHING?

Today's Text: 1 Thess. 5: 1-22

Extracts:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labour pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day... Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober... Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you [1 Thess. 5: 1-6, 16-18]

*In Nigerian folklore (from the old Benin Kingdom), there is the story of a man who felt that life had been too unkind to him and that the best thing to do was to end it all by killing himself. To dramatise his exit, he chose the huge mango tree in the village square on a busy market day. On the fateful day, he took a strong rope and as he passed through the village market, he bought **moin- moin**,¹ a favourite bean pudding that was packaged with thatching leaves. He climbed up the mango tree and tied the rope to a strong branch, with a noose for his neck. Then, he ate the moin- moin and threw down the leaves. But, as he was about to put the noose around his neck, he saw a cripple crawl to the trash he had thrown away and eat with relish the fragments buried among the leaf-folds. When the cripple had finished eating, he raised up his hands and said, "God dey!" (that is, "God lives" or better, "Thank You Lord!"). What! His own trash was another person's treasure? The man about to kill himself let the noose fall from his hands. He climbed down and determined to make it in life. In due course, he became one of the richest and most famous people in that village.*

The lesson that children were taught to learn from that story is never to give up and to give thanks to God, no matter your situation in life. Can we also learn such a lesson with the circumstances that we are facing today? Economic hardships have reached epidemic proportions. Hot and cold climatic conditions are causing havocs in every part of the world. For how much longer can we hold on, especially as we wait for the imminent return of our Lord, Jesus Christ? In Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, he has given us the recipe: in everything, give thanks! Let us find out how we too can do it.

¹ <http://allnigerianfoods.com/moi-moi>

1. Background: Giving thanks for anxiety?

You can imagine what a traumatic week it was for Job, a man from the land of Uz in early human history. Here was “the greatest of all the people of the East” that God Himself had described as “none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil.” He was rich in livestock (seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred female donkeys) and had a large household (seven sons and three daughters, with multitudes of servants) [**Job 1: 1-8**]. Who would not want to be in his place? But, unknown to Job, God had given Satan permission to test his faith. Suddenly, evil reports began to pour in. Sabean rustlers killed his servants and made away with his oxen and donkeys. Lightning struck, burning up the sheep and their rearers. Bands of Chaldean raiders made away with the camels. To cap it all, a fierce storm struck the house where all his children were feasting, killing every one of them [**vv. 12-19**]. Within a short period of time, Job’s household had been reduced to rubble- he was left with just his wife and a few terrified servants.

What did Job do? Did he weep uncontrollably? Did he try to take his life? Did he begin to blame his enemies or witches and wizards in his family for his misfortunes? No! Instead, he fell to the ground and worshipped, saying, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” [**vv. 20-21**].

We are passing through scary times. Islamic terrorists are striking in unexpected places in Asia, Africa, Europe and America. Virus infections have gone scary- *Zika* virus, caused by mosquitoes in Latin America and Lassa fever in West Africa, spread by rats, are ready examples. Streams of refugees are flowing from the Middle East into Europe, posing security risks everywhere. Economic indicators are pointing south (downwards) in both advanced and developing countries, especially with the downward spiral in oil revenues, the main stay of developing nations like Nigeria and Venezuela. Is the world finally coming to an end? Is that not an additional burden to our already stressed lives over mundane things?

When the disciples asked Jesus what would be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age, He replied, “You will hear of wars and rumours of wars ... for nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places... and because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold, but he who endures to the end will be saved” [**Matt. 24: 1-13**]. *For how much longer can/should believers endure when they do not know when the end of the age will come? Even if they determine to hold on, what can/should they be doing between now and when Jesus returns or when they die, whichever comes first? Those questions and more are causing a great deal of anxiety among believers.*

That is where Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, the fourth chapter, becomes very handy. The word of God says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" [**Hos. 4: 6**]. We may be anxious because we do not have sufficient knowledge of what to expect and how to prepare for it. All we know is that Jesus will return but only His Father knows the day and the hour [**Matt. 24: 36**]! Here is where Paul has come to our rescue. However, before looking at his recommended coping devices for us believers, here is important knowledge that we need to have about the imminent return of Jesus:

a) *The Day is inevitable but will come suddenly*

Paul writes, "For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night, for when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them... and they shall not escape" [**1 Thess. 5: 1-3**]. ***Christ's return is inevitable and imminent but we do not have the privilege to know when.***

Paul used the analogy of a pregnant woman. The doctor can give her the EDD (expected day or date of delivery) but it is a mere statistical estimate. Yet, the labour pains will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Nevertheless, the EDD will have helped her to reduce the anxiety of waiting. In like manner, believers should never let it escape from their minds that Jesus could return each day they wake up. Why is that important? You do not want to be caught unprepared. One small sin that one could not confess before death or rapture comes can take one to eternity in hell. Would that be a fair end for one's life time of faithful service in the Lord's vineyard? Think about that!

b) *You can only successfully wait for it by faith, not by fear*

In order not to be caught unprepared, Paul told the church in Thessalonica not to sleep, as others do, but to "watch and be sober ... putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation" [**vv. 6-8**]. We are to walk by faith and not by sight [**2 Cor. 5: 7**].

By sight means what we know empirically or factually- through our five senses: we see, smell, taste, feel or hear. What we know outside of our five senses can only be by faith.² That is why we say, "I believe in God." ***It takes more than fact to establish truth. It takes faith "for we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal"*** [**2 Cor. 4: 18**]. That is why the word of God tells us, "No man has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." Therefore, as many as have

² http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_3/PDFs/Makefaithyoureye.pdf

received Jesus, to them He has given the right to become children of God, “to those who believe in His name” [Jn 1: 12, 18].

Faith comes by hearing the word of God [Rom. 10: 17]. Therefore, it is only when you walk in accordance with the word of God that you can walk safely. That is what is called being Spirit-led.

From the foregoing, here is what Paul is telling the modern believer: *God sees the end from the beginning while, as human beings, we can only guess the future from what we see around us today. It is safer to go God’s way than our own way as we anxiously await the return of Jesus Christ. So, what does God’s way require us to do?* Paul also gave us very practical toolkits.

2. Your toolkits for dealing with the anxieties of waiting

Satan’s plan, as we have seen in the Garden of Eden, is to make us fall and fail so as to miss God’s salvation plan that the death of Jesus on the cross at Calvary has purchased for us. As we well know, God will not do for you what you can do for yourself. For example, when Jesus came to where Lazarus was buried, He said, “Take away the stone.” After raising him from the dead, Jesus said, “Loose him, and let him go” [Jn 11: 39,44]. It was humans who rolled the stone over Lazarus’ grave. It was humans who tied him up for burial. Therefore, God was not going to do for them what they could do for themselves! In like manner, there are certain things that we can do for ourselves while waiting for Christ’s return that will enable us to deal with the anxieties that we may face.

No matter the pressures we pass through each new day, the will of God in Christ Jesus requires us to:

a) *Rejoice always!*

Pointedly, Paul tells us, “Rejoice always” [1 Thess. 5: 16]. When you win, you rejoice. When you lose, you rejoice. When you are denied, you rejoice. When you lack, you rejoice. When you have, you rejoice. When you are slowed down, you rejoice. When you are hurried up, you rejoice. Only God knows what He has in mind for you.

Remember, for example, what the apostles did when they were brought before the Sanhedrin for preaching Christ openly. The learned Gamaliel had counselled the Jewish leaders to be careful what they were doing because if the apostles’ work was of God, no humans could stop it. Rather than let them go with mere warnings, the Jewish leaders beat them mercilessly. The apostles “departed from the presence of the council, *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for [Jesus’] name, and daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” [Acts 5: 22-42].

With your joy, you are showing the enemy that you have a spiritual Teflon skin; that no matter what is thrown at you will simply fall off! In the words of Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount, you are blessed when you are reviled and persecuted for Christ's sake. You are to "rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven" [Matt. 5: 11-12]. Try rejoicing always from now on!

b) *Pray without ceasing!*

Paul enjoins believers to "pray without ceasing" [1 Thess. 5: 17]. That suggests that everywhere /everything is a prayer point. Yes, we may have set times for prayers, such as when we wake up or go to bed, when we are at a church service, and so on. ***To pray without ceasing is to see an opportunity in everything we do to invite God into it.*** After all, we communicate with God through prayers. Do you only pray when you want to ask God for something?

The Psalmist says, "Seven times a day I praise You because of Your righteous judgments" [Ps. 119: 164]. When you take out his sleeping hours (say, six hours out of 24 hours a day), you are talking of prayers every three hours- 6 am, 9 am, 12 noon, 3 pm, 6 pm, 9 pm and midnight! When King Darius made a decree (at the instigation of Daniel's envious fellow governors and satraps) that they should only pray to the king and no other god, we are told that Daniel went to his upper room, with his windows opened toward Jerusalem, knelt down and "***three times that day prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days***" [Dan. 6: 1-10]. During His earthly ministry, Jesus prayed often, especially before taking major decisions, such as choosing His twelve apostles [Lk 6: 12-16] and before His Passion [Matt. 26: 36-46]. In the former case, He went out to the mountain to pray, and ***continued all night in prayer*** to God" [Lk 6: 12]. Jesus taught His disciples to "watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation" [Matt. 26: 41]. You too can pray without ceasing!

c) *In everything, give thanks!*

Paul also said, "In everything give thanks" [1 Thess. 5: 18]. That suggests that no matter the situation in which we find ourselves, we should give thanks. That is because, when we are in the will of God, whatever happens to us, good or bad, is for His purpose.

For example, at Troas, Paul saw in a night vision a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come over and help them. He went there with Silas and delivered a demon-possessed girl that her masters were using for fortune-telling. They were falsely accused as trouble-making Jews and put in maximum jail by the magistrates. But at midnight, Paul and Silas

prayed and sang hymns to God, “and the prisoners were listening to them.” There was a great earthquake and all the prison gates were thrown open and everyone’s chains were loosed! The prison keeper wanted to kill himself but Paul prevented him. In the end, the keeper and his family gave their lives to Christ and were baptized [**Acts 16: 6-34**]. Paul’s jail experience was in God’s plan to win souls for Christ.

In sum, when you can rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks in everything, you do not need to tell people around you that you are a Kingdom-bound pilgrim awaiting the return of Jesus to take you home. That is what Paul has taught us in today’s lesson.

3. Conclusion: Jesus is returning soon- so rejoice!

Martha, Mary and Lazarus, natives of Bethany near Jerusalem, were siblings that were well known to and loved by Jesus. The sisters once hosted Him [**Lk 10: 38-42**], and it was Mary that anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair a few days before the Passover [**Jn 11: 2; 12: 1-3**]. Yet, when their only brother, Lazarus, was sick to the point of death, the sisters sent for Jesus, saying, “Lord, behold him You love is sick.” Instead of responding right away, He stayed two more days and, by the time He came to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days and buried [**Jn 11: 1-6, 17**]. But when He came, Lazarus was brought back alive.

In a way, that story typifies our situation today. Like Martha and her siblings, we as believers claim to know and love Jesus. When we are under pressure, whether physical, emotional or spiritual, we send for Jesus by prayer and fasting. Yet, He does not seem to show up, given the pressures we are passing through. Sometimes, failure or disaster follows and Jesus has not shown up. What then passes through your mind at that stage? Do you entertain doubts about Jesus and His promise that He will never leave us nor forsake us [**Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13: 5**]?

Don’t give up. Instead, rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks- in everything! Alleluia!