

## *Reasons for Rejoicing I Thessalonians 5:16*

Those who are Bible trivia experts will tell you that the shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35, “*Jesus wept.*” This is true in the English Bible but not in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek. “*Jesus wept*” is actually three words with 16 letters in Greek.

In terms of the original writing the shortest verse in the Bible is actually 1 Thessalonians 5:16. It is composed of just two Greek words containing sixteen Greek letters. Translated into English, these two words say, “*Be joyful always.*” It is a short verse but it is a very difficult thing to do! How can Christians be joyful always?

A family from my home church served as missionaries for many years in Thailand. Because of a research and teaching assignment, the husband returned to the United States and took up responsibilities in Pasadena, California. This fall their married daughter was beaten, raped and murdered by three Los Angeles teenagers. “*Be joyful always.*”

Or, what about the single mom whose heart is heavy because she doesn’t begin to have the financial resources to pay her bills and provide for her children? Maybe she fears she is going to lose her job or is concerned over the unacceptable behavior in her kids. How is she to be joyful always?

I can tell you about a man who is going blind. Each visit to the ophthalmologist is more discouraging than the last. His hope had hinged on surgery but it made vision worse instead of better. Medications make no difference. He no longer wears his glasses because they are no use.

Do you want to add your name and needs to the list? Maybe it has to do with job or children or parents or grief or a broken relationship or a conflict or chronic pain or fear or sin or finances or handicap. The list is endless. You page through the New Testament and you come to the shortest verse of them all, “*Be joyful always.*” You want to say, “Dear God, how can you seriously say, ‘*Be joyful always*’?” Am I supposed to find joy in pain? Am I to ignore the hardships of life? Should I fake it? Or, is there some spiritual secret known

to only a few who practice some hidden art to be happy when life is melting down around them like a Chernobyl?

Somehow God is serious about calling us to joy. He sent an angel to terrified shepherds and told them, “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*” (Luke 2:10) And then he says in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, “*Be joyful always.*”

What is particularly troublesome about this verse is that it is a command. For those of you who are grammarians, it is written in the imperative mood. What we have here is not a suggestion or an encouragement or a piece of wise counsel. Here the Word of God is ordering us to be joyful! At first glance this seems to border on nonsense . . . or cruelty.

Let’s not be trivial about it. Some have quoted this verse as a cure-all. They talk as if the greatest grief of life can be cheaply chased away by some superficial happiness. It is no simple or easy thing this little verse calls us to do. Rejoicing when we are struggling for survival is not something that just happens because someone quotes a verse or tells us some cute little acronym.

God is not trying to be cute or cheap or cruel with this command, either. The words are not for those whose lives are easy and times are triumphant. These are serious words from a loving God for every chapter of life and death.

There is something very important here about the fact that what is said is in the form of a command. A command is something you do, not something that you feel. This verse is talking about actions, not feelings. One person cannot tell another person to feel happy or sad. Feelings are by-products of behavior and of conviction. Feelings are those emotions that shoot through our souls like a laser show. They are at the same time brilliant and dangerous. Feelings are extraordinarily difficult to control. In fact, sometimes just when we think they are under control they sneak up from behind and broadside us for good or ill.

***Joy is an action, not an emotion. Joy is what we do, not how we feel.***

Feelings are our emotional and often uncontrollable responses to who we are on the inside and to what's happening to us on the outside. Not even God commands us how or what to feel. But he does command us what to do! And one of those commands is to "*be joyful*." And, just in case I haven't been clear, let me say it again: Joy is an action, not an emotion. Joy is what we do, not how we feel.

Let's compare this to feeling tired. You tell the doctor that you constantly feel run down; you're tired all the time. After careful diagnosis she gives you a prescription. It is not a prescription to "stop feeling tired" nor is it a prescription to "feel energy". Such a prescription would be worthless because you probably can't change the way you feel. However, your doctor may say "exercise 30 minutes every day." That's something you can do or not do. Of course, you may say you feel too tired to exercise but at that point you must decide whether or not you are going to obey the prescription. Interestingly, the action of exercise will have the by-product of altering the feeling. When you change your behavior in that way one of the results of that change of behavior may well be a completely different feeling than you previously had.

And so it is with Christian joy. Joy is an action, a decision, a conviction—not a feeling or emotion. Joy is what we do, not how we feel. But the action of joy can change our emotions.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 commands joy. So you say, "Well then, how do you do that? How do you "*be joyful*"?"

We need to understand that joy comes from divine reality, not human appearances. Joy is an inner conviction of good that is based upon the reality of who God is and what God says. It is not directly tied to some current circumstances. Joy is what we believe as whole persons. It is rooted deeply in our philosophy of life.

I grew up near the Atlantic Ocean and to this day I have a deep love and a great respect for the sea. I can watch the waves for long periods of time. I love it. But when I studied the ocean in college I came to understand it very differently than I did when I experienced it as a boy at the beach. As a child I saw the ocean only in terms of the waves on the surface. Some days it was too rough to risk and other days it was as calm as a pitcher of milk.

In college I learned that the life of the sea is far more determined by deep currents than by the surface waves. Miles below the surface there is a stability that no hurricane can stir. So, do not try to understand the Atlantic Ocean or the Pacific Ocean by what you see on the top but rather by what flows below.

So it is with Christian joy. It is not directly tied to the current surface storm. Joy is who we are and what we believe as whole persons. It is rooted in our deep currents and convictions of life that are based upon the reality of God, not the storms on the surface.

Christian joy comes from divine reality, not human appearances. It is the reality of who God is and what God does. It is the reality that God is in charge. It is the reality that God loves us. It is the reality that God turns bad into good. It is the reality that eternity will interpret history very differently than the way we see it in time.

These and other truths about God are found throughout the Bible and we may choose to have them as the deep current of our lives.

Let's be realistic in some examples. A child is diagnosed with a terminal disease. Our lives and feelings are blown apart as if a tornado had struck. We struggle with questions of "why", of justice, of fear. Then we must choose, choose between the appearance of evil (and it does appear to be evil) and the reality of God. We must choose to believe that God knows what is going on, that he is just when everything appears unjust. We must choose to believe that God is good when everything around us seems evil and that God gives hope when all we can see is hopelessness.

A relationship is broken. It may be a relationship with the woman you loved and married, the child you bore, the friend you cherished, the career that gave you fulfillment that few experience. The storm of adverse circumstances rages. Again there must be the inner choice of believing God's reality, believing that God will heal the wound, believing that God understands and believing that God will give good reasons someday.

To be joyful is to choose God's reality for the deep currents of our lives rather than having life controlled by the intermittent storms or calm on the surface. Now, no one suggests that this is easy because it is not. Often it is very hard. But, it is

good and right and best. It is the rooting of life in a relationship with God rather than in the turmoil of circumstance.

In 1969 I became involved in a terrible tragedy. On a Sunday afternoon in good weather a young man named Gene Vogel took off from the Longmont, Colorado, airport to take a friend to a church concert in eastern Colorado. After the concert they began their return flight at night in what turned out to be a blinding snowstorm. No one knows for sure what happened. Gene had spent a lot of time around planes. His brother was a United Airlines pilot. His dad owned planes at various times. Though not instrument rated, Gene had instrument training. Yet he flew the aircraft straight into the ground at a speed of over 200 mph.

Gene was a part of the church that I pastored at the time. I conducted his funeral.

His wife, whom Charleen had known even before she and Gene met, was pregnant with their first child. Gene was young, strong, healthy, president of the student body at the college he attended.

I have tried to imagine what happened in the little cockpit of that plane on that snowy evening. My guess is that his feelings told him one thing and his instruments told him something else. He felt he was flying right even though the instruments said he was flying wrong. And he went with his feelings.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16 God is telling us to fly by the instruments. He's telling us to live life by divine reality and not the feelings that come from human appearances. That's a tough choice. It's tough to trust your instruments when your feelings say you are upside down. And it's tough to live by the instruments of God's Word when you feel like living differently. But that's what God commands us to do when he says that we should "*be joyful*".

This shortest verse in the Bible ends with the word "*always*". This means that we are to choose deep joy over surface circumstances on an ongoing

basis. You see, joy is not a classroom activity. This is real life stuff that we're talking about here.

The instrument training a pilot receives is not just for passing the FAA test, it's to be able to fly an aircraft. The real test of a pilot's faith in those instruments comes in snowstorms, in darkness, in wind and rain and over changing terrain because that's where pilots have to fly. And that's where the instruments have to be trusted.

And that's where joy is lived. Not in the classroom or from a textbook. The joy of faith in God's instruments is lived in storms, through wind and snow and poor visibility, over flat hot deserts and over high cold mountains.

This week we're all going to take off for destinations that we think we have all figured out. Some of us know the stormy weather and tough terrain coming up. Others may be caught by circumstances that will force us to again make the choice of whether we are going to go

by the feelings we cannot control or by the sure truth and stability of the reality of God. In every case, God commands us to watch the instruments. God commands us to believe his reality even when our uncontrolled emotions tell us something else. God commands us to "*be joyful always*"!

Nicolo Paganini has been described as the greatest violin virtuoso who ever lived. And, they say, he had an ego to match. Born in Genoa, Italy, in 1782, Paganini had an astonishing career. He retired at an age when most of us probably have not yet had our first full-time job. He was rich and famous. He thrilled Europe with his extraordinary playing and techniques.

A famous story about Paganini may be rooted in his unusual ability to play the violin on a single fourth string. The story says that at a concert one night a string on his violin broke while he was playing. The string dangled unceremoniously for all to see, but he simply kept right on playing to the delighted of his audience. Then a second string broke and he still kept on playing. At that point a third string popped and Paganini stopped playing, held up his violin and said, "One string and

*We must choose to believe that God is good when everything around us seems evil and that God gives hope when all we can see is hopelessness.*

Paganini!” He then returned the instrument to his chin and finished the concert. The crowd went wild with applause!

I compare that concert to my life and yours. Only I am not the performer; I am the violin and Jesus Christ is the virtuoso. When the strings of my life wear thin and break under the stress of life’s circumstances it is Jesus who plays on and can make magnificent music out of whatever is left.

What about you? Are you strung out, filled with stress, broken down? Don’t let circumstances and feelings control your life. Be controlled by the realities of God himself . . . and “*be joyful always.*”

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.faithmatters.fm](http://www.faithmatters.fm)  
©Leith Anderson