



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “Rejoice, Pray and Give Thanks”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 23,  
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

**This sermon was preached on Scottish Heritage by Rev. Graeme  
Glover from Galashiels, Scotland, Sunday, November 6, 2022 at  
First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.**

### **Introduction**

I am going to focus on only two verses this morning: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18: “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” I am going to do three things: first, explain some of the background to Paul and this letter to the church in Thessalonica. The second thing I will talk about is some of the points Paul covers in this letter and then, thirdly, to focus 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18. To help illuminate these verses, I will draw on French cinema, Dutch painting, German automobile engineering, Presbyterian College and Carolina Grits. Let us pray.

### **Background to this letter**

The background to this first letter to the Thessalonians, as I understand it is something like this. Saul / Paul is a very religious person, so much a follower of the Law, in fact, that when followers of the Way start saying that Jesus is the Son of God, he sets out to destroy them. Acts 9 tells us that when Stephen was stoned, those involved laid their cloaks at the feet of Paul.

Paul, of course, later set out to Damascus to arrest more Christians and was blinded on the way. He saw the resurrected Jesus who said to him, Saul why do you persecute me? From that moment, that moment of realization that God has saved Paul through Jesus, Paul set out to share the Good News about Jesus far and wide.

Paul would visit one place - such as Thessalonica - tell people about Jesus and help start a church before moving on elsewhere. Paul would then send someone like young Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how things are going (cf. 1 Thess Chapter 3: 2).

### **Church in Thessalonica**

The Church in Thessalonica (modern day northern Greece) is a wonderful one. Buzzing, lively, faithful full of programs. It is a real example to the rest of the Early Church. In fact, if I were a sook (to use a Scottish word) or a crawler or trying to win you over with flattery this morning, I would suggest that the way the Early Church looked at the church in Thessalonica is the same way that the other churches of Charleston look at First (Scots) Presbyterian. However, I am not going to suggest that. I am not going to try and win you over with blatant flattery - I can see that you are far, far too photogenic for that.

### **Timothy returns from Thessalonica**

And Timothy has come back, breathless, from Thessalonica with the news that things are not good. That the church is in dire straits, and it’s not really their fault. You see, what young Timothy would report is that the church have been faithful to what Paul has taught them about Jesus and what Paul has taught them is:

Mathew 16: 28 Jesus says "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

Matthew 23: 36: Truly I tell you, all these things will come upon this generation.

There is this sense in the church that Jesus is returning imminently,

The problem, as I understand it is that someone in the church in Thessalonica has died and that person has not been resurrected as Paul told them would happen. And people's faith has taken a massive dent. And you can understand it, and it is honest and right, I think, to have these moments of doubt. Paul now needs to decide how to respond. Paul could go back and visit again but instead Paul decides to write a letter to the Thessalonians.

### **Emmanuel Carrere**

Emmanuel Carrere the screenwriter, writer of literary fiction, Cannes film festival jury member and all round indoor-scarf-wearing French intellectual ponders, I think, an interesting thing. He points out how many scenes in the Bible have been depicted in paintings. Think of the paintings by Rembrandt, Michael Angelo and, ehm, many others. However, he says, there is one scene that he thinks is missing because it is so decisive in the history of the Christian Church. And the missing scene, Carrere so eloquently describes, is Paul beginning his letter to the Thessalonians. Why is this moment so important? Because, Paul's first words of this letter are also the first words written down of a book that has changed the world. What we now call the New Testament.

### **Everything that changes the world comes after this**

Yes, it seems that this letter we are reading this morning - Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians - is the oldest part of the New Testament and everything we hold dear in the New Testament (the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus forgiving Peter, Love is patient, loves is kind..., the description of paradise in Revelation) is all compiled after this.

### **A summary of 1 Thessalonians**

What follows now is a very brief summary of 1 Thessalonians before we reach the three verses I want to focus on. Paul's response, in the letter, to the crisis in the church is one of reassurance and asking the people there to remain faithful.

Paul describes what the return of Jesus will be like: "the Lord will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." (1 Thessalonians 4:16). At this climactic and dramatic moment, the dead who are 'in Christ' will rise (4:16) and then those who are alive will be "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (4:17).

But because Jesus has not returned, and people have died, we need faith as we wait for Jesus to return (Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.) What Paul seems to be asking the church in Thessalonica to do is to commit themselves more and more to trust in Jesus Christ

### **We are shaped by the Holy Spirit as we wait**

If we hold onto our faith, as we wait for Jesus to return, Paul seems to be saying then the Holy Spirit will work in us. The Holy Spirit will change us. We will become more like Christ ("You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit" (1:6.) "Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit (4:8.)

As we wait, we are shaped by the Holy Spirit, we are shaped more into an imitation of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we come to these final words - 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18: "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." - we can understand that Paul seems to mean them as an encouragement rather than a command. We can understand that the more we wait, the more we trust, the more the Holy Spirit will be in us and will lead us into rejoicing, praying and thanksgiving. Let me try and explain what I mean.

### **"Rejoice Always"**

I now minister in the town of Galashiels in the Scottish Borders. This is the country of Psalm 121 ("I lift my eyes unto the hills, where does my help come...") and Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...") It is a beautiful hilly place. However, in November 2021 when I went there to be interviewed (from my previous home on the Island of Jersey in the English Channel) by the search committee it was a wet, cold day. After the interview, I felt overwhelmed as my life seemed to be moving into a new chapter whether I wanted to or not (I can tell you this now as, twelve months on, I know Galashiels to be a wonderful place with an active and faith-filled church.)

After the interview, I drove to my parent's house in my hired car. In the dark, I reversed into the driveway and heard a jolt from behind me. I could not believe it, on a day when I was already struggling I had now managed to crash into my parent's car. My first reaction was not admirable at all (I swore) but then I prayed desperately for God to help. I got out the car to look at the damage and, to my disbelief, saw that there was not the slightest bit of damage. I could not work this out at all. I later worked out that my hire car had a mechanism in it to automatically brake when I got too close to the car behind. However, all I know is that in a seemingly awful moment, I now found myself rejoicing.

I think that is getting us to something that Paul is trying to say. It is not the case that we have to always try and rejoice but rather that, through the Holy Spirit, we will find ourselves rejoicing even in the most unexpected moments. Reminders, as I felt that day last year, that God is still with us. His words, his promises (including the return of Jesus) are not broken and we are to trust.

### **"Pray continually" - Lauren F. Winner**

The more we trust in Jesus and act in Jesus the more the easier it will be to pray continually, is what Paul seems to be meaning. Lauren F. Winner (an Episcopalian priest up in Virginia) has written a wonderful book that includes thoughts about prayer. She suggests that the main reason God wants us to pray to him all the time is not just to answer our prayers but rather for us to grow in relationship to him. We are to be ourselves in our prayers - not worrying too much about the language we use or whether the things we ask for in prayer are "good" things but rather to trust that God, who created us, just wants us to come to Him as our real selves. Doing this, Winner suggests, and we will find ourselves praying more and more to God. Almost an ongoing conversation. In other words, the more we pray as ourselves to God, the more the Holy Spirit works in us and the more we find ourselves praying until we are almost "praying continually" as Paul seems to suggest will happen as we wait and trust in Jesus.

### **"Give thanks in all circumstances"**

The people in Thessalonica are to give thanks, not just in good times, but "in all circumstances." This is partly why we teach our children to say "please" and "thank you." It's why we try to remember to say grace each mealtime. It is establishing a habit of giving thanks, so that with the Holy Spirit working through us, we may find ourselves giving thanks in all circumstances.

### **Why has Jesus not returned as promised? - Lesslie Newbigin**

Despite the promise of Jesus returning to make all things new (Revelation 21:5,) those members of the church in Thessalonica all died before Jesus returned. Paul, and Timothy, both died and Jesus still did not

return. The twelve Scottish families who established this worship community all passed away and yet Jesus did not return as promised. Many of the people we have known here on passed Scots Heritage Sundays have also passed away, yet Jesus has not returned. Are we therefore to understand that what Jesus preached and what Paul shared is simply not true?

Well, I like the explanation of theologians such as Rev. Lesslie Newbigin from the Church of Scotland. It is their argument that the reason Jesus has not returned yet, is not because Jesus was wrong but because God is so good. God wants to give his Church more time to go out and bring more and more people into belief in his Son Jesus Christ. If this is true, then all of us here this morning - older and younger - have a job to do. To go out, and share our faith with others, trusting that the more we keep in our faith the more God, working through the Holy Spirit will lead us to "rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances." After all, this is "God's will for us in his Son Jesus Christ."

#### **Ending - Paul's Words**

Rather than ending this sermon with my own words, let me end with the final words of Paul in 1 Thessalonica: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it...The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (1 Thess 5: 24, 25 & 28.)

Amen.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.