

Always

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Dr. Pierre Cannings, Ph.D.

The injunction to constant joy and prayer and to thanksgiving in every circumstance is characteristic of Paul (*cf.* 3:9 f.). The fact, however, that he notes, as in 4:3, that this exhortation is God's will makes probable that the special circumstances of persecution from without and friction within are here in mind as in vv. 14–15.

So far in this section Paul's exhortation has been directed to matters of responsible behavior in interpersonal relations inside and even outside the community. In vv. 16–22 he turns to the readers' religious duties. Each of the three actions that he commands in vv. 16–18 either has its source in God, as in the case of the first one, or is directed toward God, as in the case of the last two.

Continuity is emphasized with each of the imperatives. "Be joyful" (*chairete*), "pray" (*proseuchesthe*), and "give thanks" (*eucharisteite*) are all present tense, implying continuous or recurring activities. "Always," "continually," and "in all circumstances" strengthen the message that these actions should consistently characterize the Christian life.

in every circumstance of life," even in the midst of persecutions and friction within the brotherhood.

I. Always Rejoice

- a. Rejoice - **to be in a state of happiness and well-being, rejoice, be glad**
 - i. Abiding in Christ brings "fullness of joy," according to John (John 15:11). Paul likewise finds the ultimate source of the believer's joy stemming from being "in Christ" (Phil 4:4; 3:1). It is upon this premise that he encourages his readers to let joyfulness be a constant characteristic of their daily lives (*cf.* also 1 Thess 5:16). Paul also sees the experience of joy as a result of the indwelling of the spirit (1 Thess 1:6; Rom 14:17; *cf.* also Acts 8:39). He in fact describes joy as a "fruit" of the Spirit's presence (Gal 5:22).
 - ii. Although Paul does not spell out the source or basis of Christian joy in 5:16, the instruction to "rejoice always" derives its meaning from the earlier passages in the letter. To rejoice always is to see the hand of God in whatever is happening and to remain certain of God's future salvation.

Without such conviction joy would not be possible in the face of affliction, suffering, and death.

- iii. In 1:6 we read how the Thessalonians “received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” There the Spirit is portrayed as the source of their joy, and as I suggested in my discussion of that verse, their joy was closely associated with their confidence in future salvation and vindication as part of the community of God’s people. In 3:9 Paul asks the rhetorical question, “What thanks are we able to give to God concerning you for all the joy with which we rejoice on account of you before our God” (cf. 2:20). Paul’s rejoicing is grounded in his knowledge of God’s working among the Thessalonians and is directed toward God
- iv. Joy is produced by the work of the Spirit in the believer (Gal 5:22). But Christian joy is not self-centered. The believer rejoices in the good fortune of others (Rom 12:15) and when others demonstrate obedience in the Lord (Rom 16:19; 1 Cor 13:6; 2 Cor 7:9; 13:9; Phil 4:10). The presence of good Christian company is a source of joy (1 Cor 16:17; Phil 2:28), as is the believer’s future hope in the Lord (Rom 12:12). So even in the midst of personal tribulations Paul could find cause for joy (2 Cor 6:10; cf. 1:6). And Paul could rejoice in the spread of the gospel, even when it involved the personal pain of self-sacrifice (Phil 1:18; 2:17–18; cf. 2:19–20; 3:6).
- v. Paul has already revealed his own joy because of the converts (2:19 f. 3:9 f.), and has used the fact of their joy in the midst of persecution as a proof of their election (1:6). It is natural for him now, with the persecutions from without and the disturbances in the brotherhood in mind, to urge them not only to rejoice (Rom. 12:15, 2 Cor. 13:11, Phil. 3:1, 4:4, etc.), but to rejoice “always”
 - 1. Always

II. Always Pray

- a. Pray
 - i. Pray
 - 1. The word chosen for “prayer” (*proseuchomai*) is a general one that implies a worshipful approach to God (cf. Rom 8:26). Paul encouraged his churches to make prayer a part of their personal spiritual discipline (Rom 12:12; Phil 4:6).
 - 2. In this context, prayer would include especially supplication ὑπὲρ τῶν διωκόντων (Mt. 5:14, Lk. 6:28, Rom. 12:14). That they can thus pray as they ought is possible because of the indwelling Christ
 - 3. The way to constant joy in the midst of persecution is constant prayer unuttered or expressed. The exhortation to be steadfast in

- prayer (Rom. 12:12, Col. 4:2), to pray ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ (Eph. 6:18) is characteristic of Paul's teaching and practice (3:10, II 1:11)
- ii. Without Ceasing - ***constantly, unceasingly*** μνεῖαν ποιεῖσθαι continuous activity—‘not ceasing, not stopping’
 - 1. Obviously he does not mean this to be taken literally, but he does expect his converts to remember continually to pray for their own needs and the needs of others. This was presumably to be done both privately and in the corporate prayers of the church.

III. Always Give Thanks

- a. Give Thanks - **to express appreciation for benefits or blessings, *give thanks, express thanks, render/return thanks***
 - i. In Everything - **to totality with focus on its individual components**
 - 1. To thank God at all times is to see God working in every situation to bring about the divine saving will. This is not to say that God causes suffering and affliction, but to acknowledge, as Paul does in Rom. 8:28, that God works for the good of the elect through every situation. For this reason the Christian is obliged to give thanks to God at all times.
 - 2. Paul never instructed the church to thank God for evil events but to thank God that even in evil times and circumstances our hope remains, and God continues his work in our lives (Rom 8:28).
- b. God's will in Christ Jesus
 - i. ***Will*** - what one wishes to bring about by the activity of others, to whom one assigns a task
 - 1. In adding that this will of God operates in Christ Jesus, he designates that will as distinctively Christian, the will of the indwelling Christ who is the personal and immediately accessible authority behind the injunction (*cf.* 4:7f.). In adding still further εἰς ὑμᾶς, he intimates that the will of God in Christ is for their advantage, and implies that the Christ in them, the source of joy (1:6, Phil. 4:4), prayer (Eph. 6:18, Rom. 8:26), and thanksgiving (*cf.* διὰ Χριστοῦ Rom. 1:8, 7:25, Col. 3:17) is the power that enables them to carry out the difficult imperative
 - 2. There is no good reason for limiting this statement to only the last of the three injunctions. The parallel imperatival form of all three indicates an equal stress on each one. This in turn indicates how much importance he places on it for his converts. For Paul praise, intercession, and thanksgiving were not optional for the Christian, but were required just as much as proper ethical conduct

3. Thus at the beginning and near the end of these two chapters Paul reminded his readers that the commands given are not of human origin but divine.
4. operates in Christ Jesus, thus indicating that the will is distinctively Christian and that Christ in whom God operates is an accessible personal power whose right to command is recognized both by Paul and by his readers (*cf.* 4:7 f.). Paul implies not only that the distinctively Christian will of God is directed to the believers but also that it is to their advantage (*cf.* 2 Cor. 13:4 εἰς ὑμᾶς and he succeeds in hinting that it is the Christ in the believers who guarantees their ability to execute even this most difficult exhortation.
5. As in 4:3, Paul insists that what he exhorts is not of his own but of divine authority.
6. This feeling of joy, expressed or unexpressed, is a joy before God (*cf.* 3:9 f.), as the following references to prayer and thanksgiving make probable. The source and inspiration of this religious joy is the indwelling Christ, as ἐν Χριστῷ presently explains (*cf.* Phil. 4:4 *cf.* Phil. 3:1).

Background

The Occasion of the Letter

When Paul and Silas left Thessalonica, they proceeded about 40 miles west along the Egnatian Way to Berea. There they ministered for a short time until the hostile Thessalonian Jews, hearing of Paul's preaching in Berea, tracked down the missionaries and incited the Berean Jews to expel Paul from their city. Paul made his way south to Athens while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. Paul sent a message to these two companions as soon as he reached Athens, asking them to join him, which they did (Acts 17:10–15; 1 Thes. 2:1–5). The plight of the new Thessalonian converts so concerned Paul that he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the church's welfare. Timothy rejoined Paul at the next stop, Corinth, with encouraging news (Acts 18:1, 5; 1 Thes. 3:6–7). This led Paul to write 1 Thessalonians.

Some students of this epistle believe that Paul wrote not only to commend the Thessalonian believers for their steadfastness in persecution, but also to answer questions they sent to him through Timothy. Though there is no external evidence for the existence of a document containing these questions, it is obvious from the text that Paul wrote answers to some of their questions (cf. 1 Thes. 4:9; 5:1). These questions may have been relayed orally by Timothy. Another reason for Paul's writing was to correct misinformation and false accusations that circulated after Paul left Thessalonica. Paul also wrote to exhort them to go forward in their faith.

The Purpose of the Letter

Specifically, the Holy Spirit led Paul to pen this inspired epistle in order to meet several needs. He encouraged his children in the faith to persevere despite their persecution. He refuted false charges made by the local enemies of the gospel: that the missionaries had preached in order to fatten their wallets and gain other personal benefits; that Paul had left Thessalonica hurriedly and had not returned because he was a coward and a hypocrite. Paul also wrote to correct some errors that had cropped up in the church: an inclination to moral laxity and laziness, and a tendency not to respect the church's spiritual leaders. Paul gave instruction too on the subject of what would happen to Christians who would die before the Lord's return.

The Place and Date of Writing

References in Acts 17 and 18 as well as in 1 Thessalonians make it clear that Paul wrote this epistle from Corinth.

Evidently the letter was written shortly after Paul arrived in Corinth (Acts 17:1–10; 18:1). The references to Gallio's proconsulate in Corinth (cf. 18:12) on ancient secular inscriptions make it possible to date Paul's stay in Corinth fairly accurately—in the early 50s (Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 282). Conservative scholars

date 1 Thessalonians between A.D. 50 and 54. This would make the epistle one of Paul's earliest inspired writings, probably his second (after Galatians).¹

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Once taken out of the realm of private expressions of faith and recognized as community activities, these commands may be seen as expressions of a common faith. Paul was commending joyful worship directed toward the one true God to whom the church owed ceaseless thanks. Grumbling toward leaders (cf. vv. 12–13), impatience with the immature (v. 14), and anger toward those who do wrong (v. 15) must not tarnish the fellowship of the congregation (cf. 1 Cor 11:17–19). The church must not let its problems create an atmosphere of gloom or pessimism. Rather, an optimistic atmosphere of joy, thanks, and praise ought to characterize the assembly when believers gather (cf. 1 Cor 14:15–17; Eph 5:19–20; Col 3:16–17).

¹ Thomas L. Constable, "[1 Thessalonians](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 689.

Word Studies

Rejoice- to be in a state of happiness and well-being, *rejoice, be glad*²

All the redeemed are brought into a close union with Christ, where they experience great joy. Abiding in Christ brings “fullness of joy,” according to John (John 15:11). Paul likewise finds the ultimate source of the believer’s joy stemming from being “in Christ” (Phil 4:4; 3:1). It is upon this premise that he encourages his readers to let joyfulness be a constant characteristic of their daily lives (cf. also 1 Thess 5:16). Paul also sees the experience of joy as a result of the indwelling of the spirit (1 Thess 1:6; Rom 14:17; cf. also Acts 8:39). He in fact describes joy as a “fruit” of the Spirit’s presence (Gal 5:22).³

Ceasing - ***constantly, unceasingly*** μνεῖαν ποιεῖσθαι⁴ continuous activity—‘not ceasing, not stopping’⁵

Giving Thanks - **to express appreciation for benefits or blessings, *give thanks, express thanks, render/return thanks***⁶

Everything - **to totality with focus on its individual components, *each, every, a***⁷

² William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1074.

³ Clinton E. Arnold, “[Joy](#),” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1023.

⁴ William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 20.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, [*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*](#) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 660.

⁶ William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 415.

⁷ William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 782.

Will - what one wishes to bring about by the activity of others, to whom one assigns a task ⁸

Commentary Studies

(10) Joy, Prayer, Thanksgiving (5:16–18)

The injunction to constant joy and prayer and to thanksgiving in every circumstance is characteristic of Paul (*cf.* 3:9 f.). The fact, however, that he notes, as in 4:3, that this exhortation is God's will makes probable that the special circumstances of persecution from without and friction within are here in mind as in vv. 14–15. In adding that this will of God operates in Christ Jesus, he designates that will as distinctively Christian, the will of the indwelling Christ who is the personal and immediately accessible authority behind the injunction (*cf.* 4:7f.). In adding still further εἰς ὑμᾶς, he intimates that the will of God in Christ is for their advantage, and implies that the Christ in them, the source of joy (1:6, Phil. 4:4), prayer (Eph. 6:18, Rom. 8:26), and thanksgiving (*cf.* διὰ Χριστοῦ Rom. 1:8, 7:25, Col. 3:17) is the power that enables them to carry out the difficult imperative.

¹⁶*Always rejoice; ¹⁷continually pray; ¹⁸in everything give thanks; for this is God's will operating in Christ Jesus for you.*

16. πάντοτε χαίrete. Paul has already revealed his own joy because of the converts (2:19 f. 3:9 f.), and has used the fact of their joy in the midst of persecution as a proof of their election (1:6). It is natural for him now, with the persecutions from without and the disturbances in the brotherhood in mind, to urge them not only to rejoice (Rom. 12:15, 2 Cor. 13:11, Phil. 3:1, 4:4, etc.), but to rejoice "always" (πάντοτε as Phil. 4:4; *cf.* ἀεὶ 2 Cor. 6:10). This feeling of joy, expressed or unexpressed, is a joy before God (*cf.* 3:9 f.), as the following references to prayer and thanksgiving make probable. The source and inspiration of this religious joy is the indwelling Christ, as ἐν Χριστῷ presently explains (*cf.* Phil. 4:4 χαίrete ἐν κυρίῳ πάντοτε; GF insert ἐν κυρίῳ here; *cf.* Phil. 3:1).

⁸ William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 447.

G G (p). *Cod. Boernerianus*, saec. ix, now in the Royal Library at Dresden. "It is closely related to F, according to some the archetype of F" (Souter). Edited by Matthaei, 1791. *Im Lichtdruck nachgebildet*, Leipzig (Hiersemann), 1909. Contains I and II complete.

F F (p). *Cod. Augiensis*, saec. ix, Graeco-Latin, now in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. An exact transcript by Scrivener, 1859. Contains I and II complete.

17. ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε. The way to constant joy in the midst of persecution is constant prayer (*cf.* Chrys.) unuttered or expressed. The exhortation to be steadfast in prayer (Rom. 12:12, Col. 4:2), to pray ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ (Eph. 6:18) is characteristic of Paul's teaching and practice (3:10, II 1:11). In this context, prayer would include especially supplication ὑπὲρ τῶν διωκόντων (Mt. 5:14, Lk. 6:28, Rom. 12:14). That they can thus pray as they ought is possible because of the indwelling Christ, (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ; *cf.* Rom. 8:26, Eph. 6:18).

προσεύχεσθαι (v. 25, II 1:11, 3:1) is common in Gk. Bib.; it is a general word (τὸ ὁμλεῖν τῷ θεῷ, Theophylact), including δεῖσθαι (3:10), ἐντυγχάνειν (Rom. 8:26, 34), etc. On ἀδιαλείπτως, see 1:3.

18. ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε. "Whatever happens, give thanks to God." Since in 2 Cor. 9:8 ἐν παντί is distinguished from πάντοτε we must supply here not χρόνῳ or καιρῷ but χρήματι, "in every circumstance of life," even in the midst of persecutions and friction within the brotherhood. Even when τῷ θεῷ is not expressed, it is to be understood after εὐχαριστεῖν (*cf.* Rom. 1:21, 1 Cor. 10:30, 11:24, 14:17, Eph. 1:16). Constant joy with constant prayer leads to the expression of thankfulness to God at every turn of life. The stimulating cause of thanksgiving is the Christ within (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ; *cf.* the διὰ in Rom. 1:8, 7:25 and especially Col. 3:17).

The parallelism here between πάντοτε and ἀδιαλείπτως, and the usage of πάντοτε or ἀδιαλείπτως with εὐχαριστεῖν (1:2, 2:13, II 1:3, 2:13, 1 Cor. 1:4, Phil. 1:3, Eph. 5:20, Phile. 4), χαίρειν (Phil. 4:4; ἀεὶ 2 Cor. 6:10), μνημονεύειν (1:2), μνείαν ἔχειν (3:6) or ποιεῖσθαι (Rom. 1:9), προσεύχεσθαι (II 1:11; ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ Eph. 6:18) make it tempting to take ἐν παντί = πάντοτε (so Chrys. τὸ ἀεὶ εὐχαριστεῖν τοῦτο φιλοσόφου ψυχῆς, Flatt and Dob.). But the usage of ἐν παντί, in the N. T. only in Paul, quite apart from 2 Cor. 9:8, is against that interpretation (*cf.* 1 Cor. 1:5, 2 Cor. 4:8, 6:4, 7:5, 11, 16, 8:7, 9:11, 11:6, 9, Eph. 5:24, Phil. 4:6, 12). In the Lxx, ἐν παντί is rare and never temporal (Pr. 28:5, Sir. 18:27, 37:28 Dan. (Lxx) 11:37, 4 Mac. 8:3); in Neh. 13:6 ἐν παντί τούτῳ, it is τούτῳ not παντί which demands a χρόνῳ or καιρῷ Had Paul wished to indicate a temporal reference, he would have added χρόνῳ or καιρῷ. (Eph. 6:18; *cf.* Lk. 21:36, Acts 1:21, Tobit 4:19, Ps. 33:1, 1 Mac. 12:11; Hermas, Mand. V, 2:3), or written διὰ παντός (II 3:16, Rom. 11:10) instead of ἐν παντί On εὐχαριστεῖν, εὐχαριστία (*cf.* εὐχάριστος Col. 3:15), which are frequent words in Paul, see on 1:2, 3:9; *cf.* Epict. I, 4:32, 10:3 χαίρων καὶ τῷ θεῷ εὐχαριστῶν For the collocation of thanksgiving and prayer, apart from the epistolary outline, see 3:9, Phil. 4:6, Col. 4:2.

τοῦτο γὰρ θέλημα θεοῦ κτλ. "For this," namely, that you rejoice and pray always and give thanks to God whatever happens, "is God's will." As in 4:3, Paul insists that what he exhorts is not of his own but of divine authority. But instead of stopping here, leaving the readers to infer that God was inaccessible and his will impersonal, Paul adds characteristically, using his pregnant

Chrys. Chrysostom.

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Dob Ernst von Dobschütz,

Lxx *The Old Testament in Greek* (ed. H. B. Swete, 1887–94).

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phrase ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (2:14; see on 1:1), that God's will, the authority that has the right to give the difficult injunction, operates in Christ Jesus, thus indicating that the will is distinctively Christian and that Christ in whom God operates is an accessible personal power whose right to command is recognised both by Paul and by his readers (*cf.* 4:7 f.). With the further addition of εἰς ὑμᾶς, which would be superfluous if ἐν Χ. ἰ meant simply that the will of God was declared by Christ, Paul implies not only that the distinctively Christian will of God is directed to the believers but also that it is to their advantage (*cf.* 2 Cor. 13:4 εἰς ὑμᾶς ἸΑΔ); and he succeeds in hinting that it is the Christ in the believers who guarantees their ability to execute even this most difficult exhortation.

Since joy, thanksgiving, and prayer are related ideas (*cf.* 3:9 f.), and since the change from πάντοτε and ἀδιαλείπτως to ἐν παντί does not compel the singling out of εὐχαριστία as the only element in the will of God requiring immediate emphasis, it is probable that τοῦτο refers not simply to εὐχαριστεῖτε (so Th. Mops., Chrys., Ephr., Ell., Wohl.), or to εὐχαριστεῖτε and προσεύχεσθε (Grot.), but to all three imperatives. While it is possible to understand ὁ before ἐν Χριστῷ (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5:19, Eph. 4:32), it is probable in the light of Rom. 8:39 (τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς ἐν Χ. ἰ) that τοῦτο is to be understood (*cf.* 2:13, Phil. 3:14). Though the stress here is on the will of God as operating in Christ, yet such operation presupposes the presence of God in Christ. The omission of articles in θέλημα θεοῦ indicates either a fixed formula or that one part of the divine will is meant (Ell.). Influenced by 4:3,

Σ Σ (e a p r). *Cod. Sinaiticus*, saec. iv, now at St. Petersburg. Edited by Tischendorf, its discoverer, in 1862. Photographic reproduction by H. and K. Lake, Oxford, 1911. Contains I and II complete.

Α Α (e a p r). *Cod. Alexandrinus*, saec. v, now in the British Museum. Edited by Woide in 1786. Facsimile by E. M. Thompson, 1879. Contains I and II complete.

Δ Δ (p). *Cod. Claromontanus*, saec. vi, Graeco-Latin, now in the National library at Paris. Edited by Tischendorf in 1852. Contains I and II complete.

Chrys. Chrysostom.

Ephr. Ephraem Syrus.

Ell. Ellicott.

Wohl Wohlenberg.

Grot Hugo de Groot (Grotius).

Ell Ellicott.

DEFG add ἐστὶν after γάρ; and ⲭ A insert τοῦ before θεοῦ. L omits Ἰησοῦ. By putting εἰς ὑμᾶς before ἐν Χ. ἰ., A yields the less pregnant sense “will of God directed to you who are in Christ Jesus” (so Dob.).⁹

D D (p). *Cod. Claromontanus*, saec. vi, Graeco-Latin, now in the National library at Paris. Edited by Tischendorf in 1852. Contains I and II complete.

E E *Cod. Sangermanensis*, saec. ix, now at St. Petersburg. A copy of D.

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A A (e a p r). *Cod. Alexandrinus*, saec. v, now in the British Museum. Edited by Woide in 1786. Facsimile by E. M. Thompson, 1879. Contains I and II complete.

L L (a p). *Cod. Angelicus*, saec. ix, now in the Angelican Library at Rome. Collated among others by Tischendorf (1843) and Tregelles (1845). Contains I and II complete.

A A (e a p r). *Cod. Alexandrinus*, saec. v, now in the British Museum. Edited by Woide in 1786. Facsimile by E. M. Thompson, 1879. Contains I and II complete.

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⁹ James Everett Frame, [*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*](#), International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 201–203.

(3) Optimists and Pessimists (5:16–18)

¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

5:16 The next group of exhortations consists of three brief imperatives that are very general in character. The logic that links them to one another and to the surrounding paraenesis is somewhat obscure and in fact each could be treated independently. Wanamaker unites the three commands by categorizing them as “religious duties,” observing that each of the three commands “either has its source in God ... or is directed toward God.”¹²⁹ Best observes a link between vv. 16–18 and the preceding paraenesis. In his estimate vv. 12–15 concern behavior toward others, while vv. 16–18 address the inner life of each believer. Since the inner life (vv. 16–18) shapes the outer attitudes (vv. 12–15), the two passages are supportive of each other.¹³⁰

Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks, however, were not exclusively personal spiritual experiences. They were just as much, if not more so, public expressions characteristic of the church assembled. As a result, distinctions between the internal and external practice of religion seems rather unlikely. It is more defensible to argue that vv. 16–18 present activities directed toward God, whereas vv. 12–15 and vv. 19–22 deal with actions and attitudes toward others.¹³¹ But such an emphasis still neglects the corporate nature of the practices commended in vv. 16–18 and also results in vv. 16–18 interrupting the flow of commands in vv. 12–15 and vv. 19–22 that deal with attitudes and actions of the brethren toward others (primarily other Christians).

Once taken out of the realm of private expressions of faith and recognized as community activities, these commands may be seen as expressions of a common faith. Paul was commending

¹²⁹ Wanamaker, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 199.

¹³⁰ Best, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 234.

¹³¹ See the following discussion; vv. 19–22 deal with the church's attitude toward prophets and their teachings delivered in the assembly; cf. 1 Cor 14:26, 29.

joyful worship directed toward the one true God to whom the church owed ceaseless thanks. Grumbling toward leaders (cf. vv. 12–13), impatience with the immature (v. 14), and anger toward those who do wrong (v. 15) must not tarnish the fellowship of the congregation (cf. 1 Cor 11:17–19). The church must not let its problems create an atmosphere of gloom or pessimism. Rather, an optimistic atmosphere of joy, thanks, and praise ought to characterize the assembly when believers gather (cf. 1 Cor 14:15–17; Eph 5:19–20; Col 3:16–17).

Continuity is emphasized with each of the imperatives. “Be joyful” (*chairete*), “pray” (*proseuchesthe*), and “give thanks” (*eucharisteite*) are all present tense, implying continuous or recurring activities. “Always,” “continually,” and “in all circumstances” strengthen the message that these actions should consistently characterize the Christian life.

The frequent references in Paul’s letters indicate that joy is a characteristic of a healthy Christian life.¹³² Joy is produced by the work of the Spirit in the believer (Gal 5:22). But Christian joy is not self-centered. The believer rejoices in the good fortune of others (Rom 12:15) and when others demonstrate obedience in the Lord (Rom 16:19; 1 Cor 13:6; 2 Cor 7:9; 13:9; Phil 4:10). The presence of good Christian company is a source of joy (1 Cor 16:17; Phil 2:28), as is the believer’s future hope in the Lord (Rom 12:12). So even in the midst of personal tribulations Paul could find cause for joy (2 Cor 6:10; cf. 1:6). And Paul could rejoice in the spread of the gospel, even when it involved the personal pain of self-sacrifice (Phil 1:18; 2:17–18; cf. 2:19–20; 3:6).

5:17 The word chosen for “prayer” (*proseuchomai*) is a general one that implies a worshipful approach to God (cf. Rom 8:26). Paul encouraged his churches to make prayer a part of their personal spiritual discipline (Rom 12:12; Phil 4:6). He and his coworkers prayed together regularly (1:2; 2 Thess 1:11; Rom 1:10) and valued the prayers of the church on their behalf (5:25; cf. 2 Cor 1:11, where “prayers” are petitions, *deēsei*). But prayer was also a feature of the public worship of the assembly. Paul linked public prayer with prophecy in his discussion of propriety in worship in 1 Cor 11:4 and with the public exercise of gifts and giving thanks in the assembly (1 Cor 14:15–17). Clearly, Paul expected Christians both privately and in the public assembly to approach God with praise, intercessions, requests, and thanksgiving.

5:18 “Give thanks” translates the same verb (*eucharisteō*) Paul used when he told the Thessalonians that he thanked God for them and for their faith (1:2; 2:13). His thanksgiving for the church was directed to God both for what God had done (cf. Col 1:12–14) and in response to the faith and godly actions of the Thessalonians (2 Thess 1:3; 2:13–15).¹³³ Paul’s prayers of thanks for his churches were frequently expressed in his letters (not just in private devotion) and were clearly intended as public affirmations encouraging continued praiseworthy behavior. Public thanksgivings also serve as an example of gratitude toward others, which all Christians should follow, for ingratitude is characteristic of ungodliness (Rom 1:27). In addition, Paul’s public expressions of thanks showed his genuine appreciation for the churches and strengthened the bonds between them (Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; Phil 1:3; cf. Phlm 4–5).

¹³² Paul encouraged or celebrated Christian joy dozens of times in his letters and for a wide range of reasons. The greatest concentration of references to joy or rejoicing is found in Philippians, written while Paul was under arrest.

¹³³ For an example of thanks directed to individuals see Rom 16:3–4.

“In all circumstances” translates a phrase that could just as well mean “at all times.”¹³⁴ But the difference in meaning is not great, and Paul may have chosen an ambiguous phrase to cover both time and circumstance (cf. Eph 5:20, “give thanks always and for everything,” RSV). Paul never instructed the church to thank God for evil events but to thank God that even in evil times and circumstances our hope remains, and God continues his work in our lives (Rom 8:28).

The second half of v. 18 may look forward to vv. 19–22. But the “for” more likely connects the clause with what precedes in vv. 16–18a. The identical statement “this is the will of God” also occurs at the beginning of the paraenetic section of the letter (see the discussion on 4:3). Thus at the beginning and near the end of these two chapters Paul reminded his readers that the commands given are not of human origin but divine.

5:16 So far in this section Paul’s exhortation has been directed to matters of responsible behavior in interpersonal relations inside and even outside the community. In vv. 16–22 he turns to the readers’ religious duties. Each of the three actions that he commands in vv. 16–18 either has its source in God, as in the case of the first one, or is directed toward God, as in the case of the last two.

He first instructs his readers, πάντοτε χαίρετε (“rejoice always”). This is an integral part of Christian living, as other Pauline texts such as Gal. 5:22 and Phil. 4:4 reveal. The subject of joy or rejoicing has come up in 1 Thessalonians several times already. In 1:6 we read how the Thessalonians “received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” There the Spirit is portrayed as the source of their joy, and as I suggested in my discussion of that verse, their joy was closely associated with their confidence in future salvation and vindication as part of the community of God’s people. In 3:9 Paul asks the rhetorical question, “What thanks are we able to give to God concerning you for all the joy with which we rejoice on account of you before our God” (cf. 2:20). Paul’s rejoicing is grounded in his knowledge of God’s working among the Thessalonians and is directed toward God. Although Paul does not spell out the source or basis of Christian joy in 5:16, the instruction to “rejoice always” derives its meaning from the earlier passages in the letter. To rejoice always is to see the hand of God in whatever is happening and to remain certain of God’s future salvation. Without such conviction joy would not be possible in the face of affliction, suffering, and death.

¹³⁴ Wanamaker argues that this “temporal understanding is to be slightly favored” (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 200).

5:17 Not surprisingly Paul wished his converts to be people of prayer. He himself was devoted to prayer as a fundamental activity in his life (cf. 1:2f.; 2 Thes. 1:11; Rom. 1:10; Col. 1:3, 9). In several of his letters he instructs his readers to devote themselves to prayer (cf. 5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1; Rom. 12:12; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2, 3). Undoubtedly he believed it was the Christian's duty to engage in prayer regularly. Since the next injunction concerns giving thanks, which is an integral part of Christian prayer (cf. 1:2f.), when Paul writes ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε ("pray without ceasing"), he may well have in mind intercessory prayer (cf. 5:25), though the term is actually a general one for prayer. Obviously he does not mean this to be taken literally, but he does expect his converts to remember continually to pray for their own needs and the needs of others. This was presumably to be done both privately and in the corporate prayers of the church.

5:18 Paul's third injunction, ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε ("give thanks ..."), requires the interpreter to decide whether ἐν παντί is temporal ("at all times") or expresses the circumstance ("in every situation") in which thanksgiving should be made to God. In favor of the former is that temporal adverbs qualify the previous two instructions and that in 1:2 and 2:13 Paul employs temporal adverbs with εὐχαριστοῦμεν ("we give thanks"). Against it is that temporal use of ἐν παντί does not seem to occur elsewhere in Paul (Best, 236). While the temporal understanding is to be favored slightly, the sense of what Paul is saying is not appreciably affected. To thank God at all times is to see God working in every situation to bring about the divine saving will. This is not to say that God causes suffering and affliction, but to acknowledge, as Paul does in Rom. 8:28, that God works for the good of the elect through every situation. For this reason the Christian is obliged to give thanks to God at all times.

Paul concludes the three commands of vv. 16–18 with the motivational observation, τοῦτο γὰρ θέλημα θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ εἰς ὑμᾶς ("for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you"). There is no good reason for limiting this statement to only the last of the three injunctions. The parallel imperatival form of all three indicates an equal stress on each one. It would be indeed peculiar if Paul thought only giving thanks was the will of God, but not rejoicing and especially praying. Somewhat surprisingly Paul almost never grounds either ethical or what we might call spiritual behavior in the will of God (cf. 4:3, the only other instance). That he does so here places a very strong warrant on the behavior commanded by him. This in turn indicates how much importance he places on it for his converts. For Paul praise, intercession, and thanksgiving were not optional for the Christian, but were required just as much as proper ethical conduct.¹⁰

¹⁰ Charles A. Wanamaker, [*The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 199–201.