



*14 Days of Devotion
to God's Word*



RENEWING
The **HEART**
MINISTRIES



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*Be joyful always.
Pray continually. Give thanks in all
circumstances. For this is God's
will for your life.
~1 Thessalonians 5.16-18*

This passage is such a tall order in our world of busyness and stress and distraction.

Always. Continually. In all.

How do we fit all of *that* into our lives? Seems like a totally ridiculous expectation. And if we are to accomplish this - especially that first one of constant joy - how do we do it without being phony, without being that fake smiley-faced Christian, happy all the time even when our insides are not?

Rather than take each verse individually, start by thinking of them as a build on each other.

You can be joyful all the time...when you pray as much as you can...thanking God in all of life's circumstances...which makes you joyful...and around and around it goes.

Theologian and author, Charles Spurgeon said, 'when joy and prayer are married, their first born is gratitude.'

It is really that simple. Yet, it is hard.

There is much to uncover in this passage of less than twenty words! The next couple of days, we'll dig into more of this passage's simplicity.

Dear Lord, open my heart to the joy you have for me. Let me push away the walls I have around my heart that keep me from being joyful and thankful, which is your will for my life. ~Amen



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Let's dig a little deeper into the first ten words of yesterday's passage.

Joy is not like 'happy' which is situational and can change with a mood, or a food choice, or a good joke. Instead, joy is based on God who does not change, not on circumstances that do. Joy is a state of our spirit, a framework grounded in God that gives us strength and stability.

And joy is available to all of us.

Continuous **prayer** is not always a closed-eyes, bowed-head, on-the-knees scenario. How could we ever aspire to that? Rather, praying continually acknowledges that God is with you, wherever and whenever. It is an attitude of constancy, of knowing and talking to God as a routine part of your day-to-day life.

The verse states that we should **give thanks** IN all circumstances, not FOR all circumstances. There is a difference. It's so easy to be thankful for the good stuff, right? But life is not always good stuff. Life may throw a lot of junk our way. This verse does not say to be thankful FOR that mess, but to be thankful IN it because God is in our life, with us, involved, engaged.

Joy always, bathed in continuous prayer, helping us to give thanks in all of our life, no matter what.

Dear God, teach me to remember to acknowledge your presence in my life through attentiveness to your Holy Spirit. Help me as I learn to be joyful always, and to become familiar and comfortable with you being so near, listening for my continuous prayer. Thank you for being here in my life, always. Amen.



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The last words in the passage - this is God's will for my life - means more than I will be able to express fully. But it is worth learning a little about because it is everything that we need.

God wants us to be full of joy. And he wants us to rely on him to get there. Simple as that. He doesn't want us to be rich or famous or popular or skinny. He wants us to be full of joy in whatever of those conditions we find ourselves. The circumstances of our life are not as important to him as the condition of our spirit, of our heart, while we are in them.

A heart filled to the brim with joy is his will for us. Think on that for just a moment or two or three. He wants us, each of us, more than anything else to have joy.

We sometimes read the Bible so quickly, gloss over short verses or the all-too-familiar ones, ignore what appears to be the impossible, that we lose touch with the depth of God's love. He wants us to place our life in His hands, depending on him, talking with him about everything.

And in 18 words has come one truth - God wants us to be full of joy.

Dear God - if there are passages worth remembering, worth memorizing, this one may be one of them. Help me to remember to pray constantly and give thanks in all things so that your joy will keep flowing to me. Thank you. ~Amen.



Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, Rejoice!
~Philippians 4.4

In the book of Philippians, the word joy is used so many times that many Bible scholars refer to it as the Book of Joy. Being full of joy is not a unique concept to this book of the Bible. Joy is mentioned in a lot of other places in both the Old and New Testaments.

But this particular passage includes the phrase 'in the Lord' which is worth exploring.

Joy is a state of mind. This verse expands on that, adding that this state of mind is grounded in God. It's not in what we can see, hear, feel, eat or listen to. It's from God, emanating from his very character.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. ~Nehemiah 8.10

Joy isn't just something he gives us. God actually has joy. It is part of who he is, and he is sharing it with us, for us, inside us. This is no small thing. He has it. He gives it. That makes him the source of it.

Joy comes from God. And we have the opportunity to have it.

Dear God - thank you for loving me. Thank you for giving me this amazing gift - this gift of joy. Thank you for loving me so much that YOUR will specifically includes MY joy. With the universe at your command that you want joy for me overwhelms and humbles and calms and brings me...joy. ~Amen



Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, Rejoice!
~Philippians 4.4

When we study the Bible it is important to look at the context of a passage, particularly what comes before, what comes after, even who he was talking to. The context of this passage is interesting, in that it immediately follows Paul's description of two women having a conflict in the church.

Conflict and rejoicing are seldom found in the same context. Yet here Paul encourages them to fix the disagreement, then gives an immediate command to rejoice in the Lord, always.

Perhaps we have too often ignored the role that rejoicing plays in reconciliation. Maybe resolving conflict is less about us, and more about God. Maybe it's about getting our mind on the important - God - rather than staying on the unimportant - conflicts. That doesn't negate reconciliation, and solving the conflict. Rather, it encourages us to make sure to return quickly to the bigger picture.

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. ~Psalm 30.5

God doesn't hold on long to anger, to conflict. Perhaps we should learn to do the same.

Dear Lord - thank you for not staying angry with my sin and foolishness too long; thank you that you don't dwell on it, that you throw it away as far from you as the east is from the west. Teach me to do the same. To speed up reconciliation by rejoicing quickly, to remember you rather than the hurt or the disagreement between each other. Thank you for showing me the way. ~Amen



Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.
~1 Peter 4.12-13

What a hard concept to get our mind around: 'Participate in the sufferings of Christ.' Why should I rejoice in it, and how can that possibly lead to joy? Will I have to be crucified, beaten, ridiculed? What will I have to suffer?

A few years ago I prayed this prayer: Dear God, break my heart for the things that break yours.

God answered that prayer. Things that I didn't previously give much thought to were suddenly front and center in my mind. Media coverage of a shooting, or a terror attack, or an earthquake, or a car wreck quickly took on tear-drenched emotion. The thought of battered women and children, of the homeless, of the poverty I witnessed in the slums of Kenya. For weeks, I was barely able to get them off my mind to do my job.

There was nothing I could physically do to fix things, to help things, to make it all go away. I had nothing but prayer. I prayed that God would help, would come through, would soothe and heal and give peace and wisdom and discernment. I prayed that I would see him working in the tragedy and the evil. I prayed that light would shine into the dark places that I was sensing were real and alive and seething.

As a result an extraordinary thing happened. I was completely overwhelmed by the unexplainable, irrational presence of joy. It was like I had participated somehow in how Jesus suffered when he took on the sins of the world.

Prayer. It's really all we ever have. Christ died a painful death, suffering greatly so we could have a prayer life that puts us right into His presence, right into the joy of being there. We will certainly be overjoyed when we not only sense it, have faith in it, but when we can see all his glory. Wow! Now that will be a joy-filled time! I trust in that. Because I felt a smidgen of it here on earth.

Dear Lord - Don't let us ever forget that you are our everything. No matter what this life throws at us we have you to take it all to. Thank you that in our suffering, we have you to comfort us. You have said that you will never leave us, and we trust completely in that. Every day. Every moment. ~Amen



A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come, but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into this world. Now is the time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. ~John 16:21-22

It is interesting to me that Jesus did not take away their grief. He told them it was there. It was time to grieve. Just as we have times of sorrow and pain and hurt and confusion. So did the disciples. They could not avoid it. Neither can we.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ~Matthew 5:4

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

~Ecclesiastes 3:1,4

The physical pain of child birth is like none other. Yet, every woman who has given birth will agree that she cannot recall it, not the details of it, nor the actual physical feeling, once she holds her newborn. The very thing that caused pain, brought joy.

So it should be with believers.

We spend more time trying to get through the pain than anticipating and resting in the joy of the bigger picture. We are distracted by the pain, rather than remembering these words of Jesus: *But I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.*

He is alive. We can rejoice in that!

*Dear God - thank you for doing what you did for me so that I can live with you in heaven forever and forever. I cannot grasp the magnitude of that in my brain, but I can have the joy of knowing it will happen. I am overwhelmed when I think of the pain you went through to allow my entrance into your presence. Thank you and thank you again.
~Amen*



Though you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.
~1 Peter 1.8-9

Like all of us, the believers Peter wrote to had probably never seen Jesus in person, had never heard him preach, had never been touched by his hand. Yet they loved him. They believed in Him. Peter said they were filled with joy. Not just any joy. An inexpressible and glorious joy.

Why? Because they focused on the goal of their belief - the outcome of their blind faith - the salvation of their souls. No small thing.

In our world of distractions and social media and podcasts and blogs and internet snap-everything, we too often let this goal escape us. We let the 'fire insurance' of not going to hell become an ordinary, blasé folder in our cabinet, filed right behind our life insurance policy, old report cards and the kids' birth certificates.

These believers who Peter addressed took none of this for granted. It wasn't a small decision, the goal wasn't just an end run around going to hell. It was a massive event in their lives. And one that brought them not just comfort but inexpressible - the kind hard to even put into words - joy. No giddy, giggly happiness. Joy.

When was the last time you experienced that? Have you been speechless lately about what Jesus did for you on the Cross? If not, why not?

Dear God, forgive me for not getting this all too often. Forgive me for taking for granted the extraordinary sacrifice you made for me. I just have no words to make up for such selfish faith that I have ignored all too often. Help me, Lord, to forgive myself and to move into loving, active joy for what you did for me on the Cross. ~Amen



I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds. ~2 Corinthians 7.4

Paul wrote two letters to the Corinthian church. The first letter was a stern one as the church had strayed a bit from the simplicity of the Gospel message, and was allowing blatant sin to go unchecked. He refers in this second letter about how stern he had been, and he hoped they were not still sad about it.

This second letter is one of encouragement. This church loved Paul. They respected him as their spiritual leader, who helped them to find their way to the Cross. Paul needed to hug them from afar, from his prison cell he needed to connect with them, to restore them. He needed to let them know he was fine with them. They had repented, changed their ways. But he was concerned they would still be sad and 'grieved.'

So Paul encouraged them using words that all of us want to hear. "I have great confidence and pride in you." Awesome words that build up, that restore, that reconcile.

Encouragement is a two-way street. The Corinthian church was greatly inspired and soothed by his words, while at the same time Paul had boundless joy just thinking of them.

He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. ~Proverbs 11.25

Giving encouragement inspires joy, which boomerangs right back to you.

Dear God - thank you for your Word that is a constant encourager for those who dig in to it. You know us so well. You knew we would need to be encouraged, and that we would need it often. So you gave us the love letter of the Word so we will always have your encouragement at our fingertips, close to our heart. Thank you. ~Amen



*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of the faith, who for the joy set before him endured the Cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
~Hebrews 12.2*

Fix our eyes on Jesus: concentrated focus; an immovable, steady stare.

Fixing our eyes on our Savior prevents us from getting distracted by the worldly stuff that can pull us away from the peace he gives.

When we concentrate on Jesus, we absorb what he did. We deepen our understanding of exactly what it took to give us an eternal home. He scorned - he despised - the whole idea of crucifixion, yet did it anyway. He did it because by so doing, he saved us all. And he got to go home, to his heavenly Father.

Instead of fixing his eyes on the Cross, he fixed it on the joy that was coming. The joy that would be revealed when he sat himself down next to the throne of God.

*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.
~2 Corinthians 4.17-18*

We too can fix our eyes beyond today, beyond our world, beyond our troubles and pains and fears. We can fix our eyes on Jesus - on what is unseen. We fix our eyes on the joy to come.

Dear Jesus - help me not to get distracted from fixating on you, and only you. Let my troubles blur in my vision and mind compared to the clarity of the joy that is to come, that your death on the Cross ensured me. ~Amen



*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.
~John 15.5*

Joy is a fruit of the spirit (besides love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control ~Galatians 5.22). Early in my Christian walk, I believed that I could create all of that fruit by myself. - all of that good stuff that reflected my good heart that God - and others - would then notice. So for each of 9 weeks I worked on one of the fruit.

The problem was I never seemed to hold on to what I had worked on the week before. Depending on which week you caught me, I was either very patient or very kind or way more gentle than usual. But I was never all, or even a good version of one!

The reason? I had taken myself off the vine, becoming a branch blowing around in the underbrush of life on my own. I received no nourishment, no strength, no living fluid to keep the fruit alive if it had, in fact, even blossomed. It was weak. And shriveled. Jesus described it this way:

If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned.

~John 15.6

If we stay connected to him, we will produce this fruit - including Joy. We will get pruned and refined and our prayers will be fruitful. All of it - Bible study, prayer, repentance - is interconnected and entwined, and are part of building a faith that will stand up to whatever wind blows our way.

Dear God - thank you for giving us a place to 'plug-in' so that we don't lose our focus. We so often stray away and get distracted, but when we stay with you, the vine, we are consistently reenergized and refreshed, our joy renewed. Thank you for giving us the choice not to be swept into the fire, but to live fruitful lives for you. ~Amen



*Your love has given me great joy
and encouragement,
because you have refreshed the
hearts of the saints.
~Philemon 1.7*

The fruit of the spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5.22) - are evident in the lives of those who are plugged in tightly to Jesus. There is something different in their daily lives, their words, their eyes. They are an immediate refresher to your soul.

Too often we see the fruit as some physical presence of good stuff in our lives, that we can display for all to see. We see the fruit as something we profit from, that is for our own good alone. We seek the fruit so we can be happy, so we can be peaceful.

It becomes a self-centered pursuit of our own comfort, and can easily morph into prideful ambition which we are directed to run from quickly. (Philippians 2.3)

In reality, the fruit is for the benefit of others. Yes, we personally benefit, but every one of the 9 fruit described by Paul in Galatians is for the benefit of others. We experience joy that encourages others. Our peace is unique and attractive in a stressed out, chaotic world. We are patient and kind with ourselves surely, but also we are patient and kind to others. We are good and faithful and gentle and keep ourselves under control.

If you wrap them up in a box, put on the bow of Love, we are giving a gift to the world. A gift of Jesus.

*Dear God - teach me about the vine. Teach me how to stay tight to the source of my strength, and from where the fruit will blossom and grow. Help me to keep my eyes off of me and how this will benefit me, and instead pray that my thoughts are pure and unselfish, and that the fruit will grow to be an encouragement to everyone I encounter.
~Amen*



Considering it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.
~James 1.2-3

For those who don't understand God - believers and non-believers - there are some who think that if you 'have God' you have no problems, no challenges, no trials. If something bad happens God is at fault because he didn't remove it, didn't solve for it, or heal it, or overcome it.

These folks have idolized comfort, problem free living. They think they know the Bible. They wonder why 'have God' if he's not going to make your life easy?

The word 'whenever' means that problems are inevitable, unavoidable. They WILL happen. Jesus said,

In this world you will have troubles. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

~John 16.33

Testing of our faith assumes there is faith in our life to begin with, which is then reflected in how we deal with those inevitable problems in our lives. It is faith that develops perseverance.

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. ~Romans 10.17

It is faith that will help us hang on while we are in the midst of it, neck-deep in the muck.

Dear God - guide me in my study of the Word that my faith will continue to grow so that I will be ready for the 'trials of many kinds.' Prepare me through your Word to stand up to the challenges and the problems of this fallen world, and come out the other side with renewed and strengthened perseverance. Thank you. ~Amen



*Consider it pure joy, my brothers,
whenever you face trials of many
kinds, because you know that the
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severance.*

~James 1.2-3

This verse is so very clear about what results from dealing with challenges - of any and many kinds - with God on board. Each problem in our life, each challenge, each pain in the neck we endure develops perseverance.

This is more than just the patience to wait in the grocery line. It is more like the strength to finish a marathon.

It's hang-on strength. One more mile. One more test. One more operation. One more layoff. One more hurt. One more sad news. One more. Hang on.

Is God here with me?

Hang on, He is there. He will bring you through.

*Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature
and complete, not lacking anything.*

~James 1.4

Grounded in that knowing, in faith-filled confidence that He is there, that is joy. That is Jesus.

Dear Lord - how I yearn sometimes for easy answers, for less challenge, for less heartache. But I know you are there in the midst of it all, and that you will complete what is needed in me so I will lack nothing. Thank you that you did not leave me to navigate all of this on my own. ~Amen

