

KIND OF LIKE WI-FI

1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

Laurie and I were three years into a new church plant. Our little church was surviving, even growing some, but was still a small operation that couldn't pay us much. Every month was a race to see which we would come to the end of first, the little money we had or the month. At that time we had our first child. We were living in an apartment complex that did not allow children. We could live there with our baby for three or four months, but then we'd have to move. Unfortunately, we couldn't find another place we could afford.

When Carissa was a couple of months old a wonderful family in our church informed us they had to leave the area. He had gotten a new job and it required that they relocate to Texas. They had a very large home on an acre in Del Mar that they had been trying to sell with no luck whatsoever. Interest rates were stratospheric at that time, well into the double digits, and the real estate market had less life than the Dead Sea. This family offered to let us live in that big home after they moved out. It would be on the market, but no one was coming to look at it, so they said it shouldn't bother us. They told us we could live there for free and they figured we could be there for a minimum of six months, probably more.

What a blessing! No rent for the foreseeable future meant we could save up all the money we normally would have spent on rent. We even dreamed of living there long enough to save up sufficient money to have a down payment so we could buy a small condo in the area. So we moved into this huge house. We had hand-me-down furniture that fit in an 800-square-foot apartment, and now we were rattling around in this very large home. Whatever happened, we knew that our financial situation was going to get a lot better because we would save a lot of money. It seemed unlikely the house would sell, because with interest rates so high, the payments on this hugely expensive house would have been prohibitive. Sure enough, weeks rolled by and no one came to look at the house.

After we had lived there a little over two months, a real estate agent brought a lady to look at the house. We got out of the way and didn't think much of it. A few days later we were stunned when our friends who owned the house called us. They were very apologetic, but they informed us that lady had bought the house and we were

to have to move. That was disappointing, but it got worse. The woman was paying cash for the house, so there was not going to be a month-long escrow. She wanted to move in immediately. We had exactly one week to find a new place to live and move out.

Panic ensued. We had searched for months for a place to live to no avail whatsoever. Now we had a week to find a place and move? How were we supposed to do that? In the end, we had to rent a house that was more than we could afford, so instead of our financial situation getting better, it was going to get a lot worse. We had barely enough money for the deposit and first month's rent. Some friends rallied around to help us move our meager belongings to our new home. The day we moved we had a couple of pickup trucks that we loaded up. One of them had our refrigerator in it. The driver got off the freeway at Manchester, but he was going too fast. As he was making that big loop on the off ramp, the fridge launched out of the pickup and sailed away. Refrigerators don't fly very well. But they fly a whole lot better than they land. We put up a grave marker there where our refrigerator died that day. Now on top of everything else, we were going to have to buy a new refrigerator.

We were already stressed over having a child and moving into a home that would severely stretch our budget, and now we had to get a new refrigerator as well. According to the verse that we looked at last week, my reaction to all of that was supposed to be joy. I was supposed to rejoice in it. That was not my first reaction.

Joy is a beautiful thing. We all are drawn to it. We want to have it. God wants us to have it. He commands us to rejoice at all times. Most of us wish we had more joy than we do. Last week we saw that the gospel gives us reason to rejoice because it provides answers for the guilt, hopelessness and self-obsession that sap our joy.

However, there are two other powerful factors that drain joy from our lives. One of them is fear or anxiety, and the other is discontentment. When we are stressed, anxious or afraid we do not rejoice. Similarly, if we are unhappy and upset about our circumstances we will not rejoice. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18, Paul gives us tools that help us overcome those forces so that we can rejoice always.

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Last week I pointed out that one of the reasons we can rejoice at all times is that God reigns. That is a crucial truth when dealing with fear or anxiety. But how do we connect that intellectual knowledge with our heart when it is disturbed and anxious? The answer is to pray.

One of the more familiar verses in the Bible is Philippians 4:6-7. I don't think it is coincidental that Philippians 4 follows a pattern not unlike what we see in 1 Thessalonians 5. In Philippians 4:4 Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" That is like 1 Thessalonians 5:16 where Paul said we should rejoice always. He understood that is hard to do when you are worrying. So he told them how to handle that. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Prayer helps us because it is a way of verbalizing our concerns. Early in our marriage I used to get a little impatient with Laurie when she would talk about some issue that was bothering her. I would come up with a great idea about how to deal with it, and pretty soon she would start talking about it again. What was her problem? I'd already helped her figure out what to do, why was she talking about this again? I would review the solution for her, but not long afterward she would be back at it. Now it seemed that she was just being dramatic and making a thing out of it, or she was complaining. I was really dense and didn't understand what was going on. I would tell her she was just complaining. What a revelation it was when I realized that part of the way she relieved the stress of a problem was by talking about it. Talking about it wasn't complaining, it was shedding stress. At first I thought that was just how women thought. But eventually I discovered I do the same thing and was not aware of it. In fact, I found that it is not uncommon when people are dealing with a difficult problem and they ask to talk to me, they don't really want me to come up with some solution, they just need to talk. For many of us just talking about something can make us feel better.

But prayer has a bigger effect even than that. By taking our requests to God we are acting in faith that he actually does rule in all things; that he can actually work in the events of our lives. In other words, we can ask him to deal with whatever the anxious situation is and know that he will do it. We are applying the truth that God reigns to the situation that is causing us concern. The act of praying not only prompts God to act, it reminds us that he will act and bring about our good, and that no created thing can stop him. We can have peace by putting the problem in his hands and relaxing.

One of the best pictures I've ever experienced of praying happened when Laurie and I were traveling. We had a fairly complicated series of flights to make on our way home from a trip and we had a lot of luggage. We had packed more heavily than we needed to, plus we had a bag for recreation equipment we had taken. To make matters worse, we had bought some souvenirs that wouldn't fit in our luggage, so we bought an extra suitcase to pack them in. This was back when you got two free pieces of luggage per

ticket. So we had four pieces of checked luggage plus two carryon pieces each. We had to change airlines as part of the trip so I was quite stressed about getting all this stuff checked through properly. To add to the fun, the airport was really crowded and we were a little pressed for time. While I was trying to get everything sorted out, Laurie disappeared for a few moments. She came back shortly with a Skycap in tow. He took our tickets and all our bags and went away. He came back a few minutes later, handed us our boarding passes and informed us it was all done. I had done nothing but hand him the problem and wait! He took care of everything. It was wonderful! Laurie is brilliant. She had done an obvious thing that many do without thinking about it, but for some reason it never occurred to me. I was so caught up in the stress of the situation I failed to take advantage of a wonderful solution. We do the same when we fail to pray.

I don't want you to draw the implication that God is our Skycap. He is not our servant. But how much better to hand the whole problem over to him to deal with, for he has the wisdom and the power to handle whatever we may face. As we grow anxious we should see ourselves being like the Myatts at that airport. Just hand the problem to the Lord and relax. Let him deal with it, for he can and will.

We want that to mean we hand the problem to God and he resolves it exactly the way we want him to, but it doesn't mean that. Paul's promise in Philippians 4:6-7 was that the result is we will receive God's peace. It doesn't mean the situation will have our desired outcome. If we truly hand the problem to him we have to let go of it and the outcome as well. We have to let God decide what to do with it. We trust the outcome to God. But we will get his peace. Not only will we have the peace of not having to solve the problem ourselves, but God will put his peace in our hearts.

But what are we supposed to pray about? What if it is something that isn't that big of a deal? What if it is some relatively trivial matter of mostly selfish interest? On more than one occasion we've been setting up for church on Sunday morning and discovered the video projector is not working. It's hard for people to sing the songs if they don't know the words, so this really puts a dent in worship. The stress level immediately does a quantum leap. Then we pray about it. If the projector doesn't work, the kingdom of God will not be shaken. It's not a Jack Bauer situation where thousands of lives are at stake. But I guarantee you, we pray about it. I'm going to share a little example from my life in a moment that was one of the most trivial of matters you can imagine, but it was something I prayed about.

"Oh, this is too small to ask God to deal with." Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." God even decides the roll of the dice. So nothing is too big or small. Here's the way to gauge whether to pray about

something: are you anxious about it? If you get anxious about it then instead of stressing, pray about it, no matter how big or small, no matter how noble or self-oriented. If you stress about it then choose to pray about it instead. Leave it to God to handle. It doesn't mean God will give you what you want, but you will have peace.

What about this “pray without ceasing” thing? Does that mean we are supposed to be praying every minute? How are we going to get anything done if we are always praying? I've learned a painful lesson in marriage. I can talk to Laurie or I can concentrate on reading something or watching television. I can't do both. If I talk to her without ceasing, I'll never get anything done. Isn't the same true of our relationship with God?

One thing it means is that there must never be a time when we give up on praying. We must never say, “I tried praying and it didn't work. I prayed and nothing happened so I gave up.” We must always trust, even when we aren't getting the immediate answer we wish we would receive. Luke 18:1 says, “Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”

But wait, there's more! I was thinking about the kids who are graduating from high school this year. Princess Diana, Jacques Cousteau and Mother Teresa weren't ever alive during their lifetimes. The closest they've come to using an encyclopedia is Wikipedia. In fact, they may never have even seen an actual encyclopedia. They don't know what a camcorder or VCR is and they've never seen a cassette tape. They have always had to be instructed by teachers that, in writing a paper, they have to have some sources that are not online. For these kids, the internet and Google have always been there. Not only do they not recall a time when there was no internet, they also have no idea what you mean if you talk to them about “dial up.” Those of us who are older remember dial up access to the internet. What a cool thing it was to be able to actually connect to this thing called the World Wide Web where there was unlimited information. Those kids don't know those sounds, the dialing beeps, the high-pitched tone, then the static of connecting to the Net. And, of course, they also don't know the frustration of growing old while you were waiting for a website to load because dial up was glacially slow. A mascot for dial up internet access might be a slug, except slugs move at light speed compared to dial up.

What a wonder it is today to have wireless, high-speed internet in your home. It is always right there. If you want to access the internet, you just click the browser on your computer, tablet, smart phone or even your smart TV, and boom, there it is. It is always on. And that's a little bit like praying without ceasing. It is Spiritual Wi-Fi. The connection with God is always open, everywhere you go all the time. Just like while the

Wi-Fi is on, I may not be surfing the web at any given moment, but I can instantly go on the web for the connection is open. As I go through my day I may not be talking with God, for I might be performing a task or having a conversation with another person, but I can instantly talk to God because the connection is always open.

Sometimes you listen to Christian speakers and you think that you need to have an extended “quiet time” to pray. That’s like having time to fire up a dial up internet connection, having the time to wait for it to slowly connect and load. Having extended time to pray is a good thing, but praying without ceasing means talking to God any moment.

It is interesting that in today’s church culture we feel like we have to close our eyes and bow our heads to pray. Do you know that the Bible never tells us to do any that? In fact, Psalm 123:1 says, “I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven.” Prayer is not a formal act that we perform in certain ways, it is communicating with God, something we can and should do any and all times.

I recently mentioned that the first time I flew solo with taking care of our granddaughter, Ella, that I didn’t have quite as much training as I wished. Laurie was pressed for time, so she handed her to me telling me to feed her, then change her diaper. When it came to the diaper change I was confronted with the new kind of diaper that is different from the ones I put on our kids 30 years ago. I didn’t know quite how they worked. I felt a little stressed about it, so I actually prayed. “Lord, please help me figure out how to get this thing on little Ella.” I didn’t bow my head, I didn’t close my eyes, I didn’t go off to a quiet place by myself. I just fired off a fast plea. My only other alternatives were either to fret, or to call Anna or Laurie and admit I didn’t know how to change a diaper. The great news is the prayer was answered. The greater news is we can pray without ceasing. We can talk to God anytime, anywhere. The connection is open.

Every time I talk about prayer I have to say this because we forget it: Prayer is not a duty, it is a gift. It is a great privilege. We don’t lose God’s love if we don’t pray. We don’t lose salvation. We don’t somehow become second- or third-class Christians at best. We simply fail to use the most beneficial and powerful tool imaginable, and we suffer for it. Instead of being at peace, we get stress, worry and fear. So pray without ceasing, because then you can rejoice.

GIVE THANKS

The other problem that we face is that at times our circumstances are going to be far from desirable. We are going to experience disappointment, hurts, frustration and even grief over terrible losses. That’s part of life in this world. How many of us have seen

life go the way we dreamed it would, the way we wanted it to go? There are very few people who don't have a semi sized load of disappointment.

Years ago I was responsible for accidentally hitting Laurie in the face with a bungee cord. She ended up in the hospital having the wound stitched up. That night at home I felt wretched. Poor Laurie suffered because of something I had done. I was so upset I couldn't sleep. In the middle of the night, wracked with guilt,

feeling awful, was I supposed to rejoice? How are we supposed to rejoice when life is hard or disappointing? How do you rejoice when life has let you down?

Six years ago you all know that Laurie and I went through that thing where our previous church put me on a leave of absence, the prelude to firing me. I recently came across some things that were said and written to me that were pretty painful. During that time we were sent to Idaho for a "retreat," and counseling. Honestly, we went with all the eagerness of someone walking into a dentist's office for a root canal. The day we started our trip, Laurie's parents took us to the airport where I discovered I had forgotten my wallet. I had no ID. We ended up being put in Time Out by the TSA, fearing that because of my stupid mistake we were going to miss our flight and make a terrible hash of the whole thing. I remember standing there by the TSA lines, waiting, with people looking at me wondering what terrible thing I'd done, and my first thought was not to rejoice. I was not thinking, "Well what a joyful experience this is."

Paul says the way to rejoice, even in those kinds of situations, is to give thanks. He says we should do that always, no matter what the circumstances. So I'm supposed to give thanks when I'm about to get fired and don't know what I'm going to do next, when I've forgotten my ID and TSA thinks I'm a terrorist, and my wife doesn't think, she *knows* I'm an idiot? Yes, that's exactly what to do.

How are we supposed to do that? First, we have to pay attention to the prepositions. We are not commanded to give thanks *for* all things, but *in* all things. That's a big difference. This command reminds us that because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ his Son, we have something to be thankful for even on our worst day, something that is so good, that is such an incredible gift that it dwarfs even the worst thing that could ever happen to us.

Second, we are not being told here to *feel* something, but to *do* something. We are told to give thanks. Even when we are disappointed or hurt, we can choose to give thanks to God for the good that he has done and is doing for us. Standing in the TSA Time Out

area wearing the dunce cap I wasn't happy, but I could still choose to give thanks to God for his grace in my life.

Remember what pastor and author John Ortberg says about thanks. "You cannot manufacture gratitude by willpower." You can't grit your teeth and muster up feelings of gratitude because you know that you are supposed to. How then does gratitude come about? Gratitude comes when you perceive that you have received something good. It comes from how you see the world.

In order for you to feel grateful you must see both a benefit and a benefactor. You must feel like something good that you don't deserve has been given to you, and you must feel like someone has given it to you. If you feel like you deserve something you won't feel much in the way of gratitude. I got a little jolt this year when I dutifully did my taxes early and sent in my forms, anticipating I would receive the tax refund I was due in about three weeks. After more than six weeks I began to be concerned. No tax refund. Where was it? Was there a problem? The last thing I want is to get sideways with the IRS. One day after two months I received what I dreaded, a letter from the IRS. They insisted I give evidence for the amount of money that had been deducted from my check. I didn't understand why they needed that since they already had that information, but I sent it in immediately with a prayer that there was no problem. A couple of weeks later the check finally showed up. I was glad, but I was not grateful to the IRS. It was my money. They owed it to me. They'd been keeping it from me.

We are the most grateful when we know that we don't deserve the very good thing that we've received. This has to do with how we think about the world and about what God has done. We should start with thinking about life. Is this world a product of a really huge explosion, followed by an impossibly long series of random accidents that are nothing short of miraculous? If that is so, then everything that happens in our lives is also random and pointless. But if, as the Bible claims, God created the heavens and the earth, if every day of your life is written in his book, then none of this is random and there is a point to all of it. All of your life, in fact, is a gift from God.

One afternoon recently was beautiful and sunny. A window was open and I became aware that I could hear birds chirping outside. We have a lot of crows that live in our area and often you can hear them. I'd rather not. Their raspy caw is not an especially pleasant sound. But these birds were chirping, twittering and singing away. It was a delightful sound. It occurred to me that God could have made all the birds to caw like crows or to make no sound at all. Hearing the pleasant sound of birds singing just brightened my day, and as I listened I realized it is a gift from God. The fact that I could

hear them is a gift from God. The fact that I got up today and live for another day on this planet is a gift from God. I look out in our backyard and see a riot of color. There are pink roses, white roses, a deep red bougainvillea, a pink bougainvillea, yellow lemons, purple flowers of some kind, and much more. It is glorious, and it is all a gift from God.

James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift comes down from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." Every good thing we experience is from God. He is the source of all good, without him there is no good. I have so many incredibly good things in my life. I had wonderful parents, I have the most terrific wife in the history of the human race, I have incredible children who are married to amazing people, I now have a granddaughter who might be the cutest baby ever. I have dear friends. I have always had plenty to eat, clothes to wear, a house to live in. I live in one of the most desirable locations on the planet. God has rescued me from being lost and hopeless. He has forgiven me, he loves me and has given me eternal life. He has given me his word to guide me. He has repeatedly brought good for me out of even heartbreaking events.

The list could go on forever, just as yours could. These things that God has given me are of infinitely more worth than most of the things I might be disappointed about. Would I be happy and satisfied if I had been able to have a successful career as a professional athlete, but I wasn't married to Laurie, didn't have my kids, and didn't have the hope of eternal life? No way. That would be terrible. If given the choice between that athletic career and any of those things, I would not trade them. I have the better part by far.

We must ask, which is more important: Knowing God and having the many blessings he pours out on us, or having the particular circumstances we are certain we need so badly? If knowing God and his blessings are by far more important, then we have reason to give thanks.

Almost 20 years ago we had the opportunity to take our kids to Hawaii for a vacation during the Thanksgiving holiday. They were really excited about it. They had friends who had been there and they were sure it was going to be terrific. A few days before our trip Carissa came down with a crummy cold. The poor thing was going to have to fly to Hawaii feeling lousy. I remember her being on that plane looking kind of miserable. I said, "I'm so sorry, Carissa." She said, "It's okay, Dad. I'm excited. We're going to Hawaii!" Her circumstances weren't perfect, but she had something bigger and better than her cold, so she was thankful.

If you want to be unhappy, there is no end of opportunity to get unhappiness. Someone once said, “Suffering is inevitable, but misery is optional.” We can choose misery and unhappiness. Or we can choose joy. Key to choosing joy is reminding ourselves of the deluge of goodness that God has poured into our lives and consciously, purposefully thanking him for it. On our worst, most despairing day, we have God’s grace given to us through Jesus Christ, we have the hope of eternal life, we have his presence with us; and that is reason to give thanks.

Have you ever noticed Philippians 1:12-18? Paul was incarcerated unjustly and had been for years. He was being kept from doing God’s will. All he had done was put his life on the line, give himself up continually and totally to serve and obey God, and God rewarded him by allowing him to be arrested and kept in prison unfairly for years. I have no doubt that he prayed, and he just stayed right there. He wanted to go out and tell the world about Jesus, but nothing happened. He could easily have been disillusioned with God. But he wrote, “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”

Do you see what he’s doing? He could be looking at only the bad stuff in his life, because that’s mostly what it consisted of. His circumstances were awful. Instead, he’s giving thanks! He’s giving thanks for the good things he sees happening. There were people who, while he was in jail, were preaching Christ just to cause trouble for him, just to try to keep people from following him. How small can you be! His attitude was, “Great! Thank God. They may have stinky attitudes, but Jesus is being preached, so who cares? All that matters to me is that people are hearing about Jesus!”

If you want joy, the most powerful thing you can do is be a grateful person. Choose to give thanks for the abundant good God pours out on you, never taking anything for granted. Make that your habit of life. I guarantee you that if you make this your very character, your way of living - if you continually give thanks to God, seeing not the hard things or the negatives of life but the innumerable blessings you experience every moment of your life - it will transform you. You will find joy.