God's Will, Word and Power for Your Life
1 Thess 5:16-28

So we've reached the end of our time in 1 Thessalonians. And to remind you, Paul is writing to a young church, made up of young Christians, who are facing significant opposition for their faith, stuff that even mature Christians might struggle with. And so, one of the things he's done as he's gone along is to encourage them in their response to what they face.

And as he brings this letter to a close he does it again. He addresses their inner lives, how they themselves, as individuals, are to respond to what they face. And yet, he clearly has more in mind than these guys living on their own little spiritual islands. He's also aiming at how their – and our - individual responses to the ups and downs of life, are going to shape how they, and we, as a church respond.

Let's look at the passage together: 1 Thess 5:16-28

Three points: God's Will for Your Life; God's Word for your Life, and God's Power for your Life.

God's Will for your Life
Look at v16: 'Rejoice always.' Now just think about the weight of that. Here are people, some of whom have lost their loved ones in the last few months; who have faced opposition and exclusion for their Christian faith, who we know are suffering significant financial hardship, and Paul says, 'rejoice always!' 'Whatever you guys are facing, whatever life is throwing at you, rejoice, experience joy in it all!'

Is he mad? I mean, how can he say that, how can he ask that? Paul, have you any idea what they are facing there in Thessalonica? Well, he knew very well what they were facing, he faced it himself, and Paul modelled what it meant to rejoice whatever life throws at you.

You see, when he says 'rejoice always' he means what he writes later to the church at Philippi: 'Rejoice *in the Lord* always' (Phil 4:4).

Now if you were in church last Sunday morning, you can't have helped but hear Jessica say that even in all the years of her and Grant's infertility, God was good. Was God good in giving them Asher as a son? Absolutely! But he did not suddenly become good when he gave them Asher. He was good when there was no Asher. In all the tears and the pain and the questions and the heartache, God was good.

And these Thessalonians, and you and I can rejoice always, in whatever cards life deals us, in whatever comes our way, when we know that God is always good. That he is relentlessly working out his plans for good for us. That though others might mean stuff for our ill, God promises to turn it to our eternal good.

You see, it is possible to have joy outside of God, isn't it? You can win the jackpot and be as a happy as Larry! Someone can say something good about you at work and you feel good. Your team win and you are over the moon. You do something good with the kids, and it leaves them smiling, and inside, you're smiling too. But there is a joy that goes deeper, and higher than that kind of joy. A joy that transcends our circumstances. You see, if joy is based on how good or otherwise

life is, we simply will not be able to rejoice always, because our circumstances aren't always goo. They change. We can only, ever, rejoice always, if our ultimate joy is based on something that doesn't change. On something that *is always* good. And the only thing, the only person who never changes is God. And so these guys, and you and I, can find joy even in the dark days, the days when there are tears, when our joy is in our heavenly Father and his love and care and faithfulness to us.

But that personal, inner joy is also going to determine our public, outer worship services, isn't it? Joy in God has to spill over. Now, in England there used to be a saying that there were three things you never spoke about at a dinner party, and one of them was religion. You keep that private. But when God's people gather, you cannot keep joy in God private, can you? When you know, when you sing about, all that God has done for us in Jesus, our public gatherings should not be marked by gloominess, should they? It should not be as if a dark cloud hangs over us. When you understand the truth of what Jesus has done for you, when that seeps into your heart, you can't sing dully, can you?

Joy sings at full volume, and with hands raised. Joy stands in awe and silent wonder. Joy weep tears of grief, or thankfulness. But joy is never half-hearted or disinterested and it never mumbles. Joy flows over.

And so Paul says that 'rejoicing always' is going to mark our gatherings. And let's face it, if we understand the gospel, it's got to.

But then look at v17: 'Pray without ceasing.' Now, as a family, over the summer, we took a one week road trip around Switzerland, and as we were heading east, we joked about driving all the way to Slovenia. But we realised that none of us had a clue about their language. So as we were driving along, one of the girls looked up on the internet some useful phrases to help us get by in Slovenian, and alongside 'my hovercraft is filled with eels' my girls' favourite was 'this gentleman will pay for everything.'

I mean just imagine being able to go through life, pointing at your dad, and saying, 'this gentleman will pay for everything.' And yet, Paul is saying that in God our heavenly Father, we have such a father who has the power and ability to pay for everything, to meet all our needs. A God who knows everything, and can do everything. A God to whom we can take all our anxieties and all our concerns. And we can pray to him without ceasing.

Now, of course, he doesn't mean we are to go around on our knees all day, does he? That would be tricky. And he doesn't mean withdraw to a monastery or a convent and pursue a life of contemplation. He means to cultivate a continual sense of dependence on God. That whatever you're doing – taking the car into the garage, making a decision about how to spend your money, disciplining the kids, disagreeing with a colleague, you can, at that moment, bring it to him in prayer. It is to look to God with faith for everything. It is to cultivate his presence and turn to him throughout the day.

And if we, as individual Christians, are praying people, we're going to pray in our services as well. We're going to pray for the spread of the gospel in this region,

and across the world. We're going to pray for our governments and our leaders; we're going to remember our persecuted brothers and sisters. And we're going to pray for one another.

After all, did you notice v25? 'Brothers, pray for us.' Here is Paul, the great apostle, asking these unknown, brand new Thessalonian Christians to pray for him. Why does he do that? Because he knows he needs prayer. We all do. He knows he cannot do life on his own. In spite of all his learning, his skill, his willpower, Paul knows that he needs God. And for you and I to ask others to pray for us, is to humble ourselves, it is to say, 'I need help', and that makes us feel vulnerable. But it is precisely that weakness and vulnerability and humility, that opens the door to God's power in our lives, as our brothers and sisters pray for us.

But then look at v18: 'Give thanks in all circumstances.' And if our joy is in God, and we are looking to him in dependence, throughout the day, then it's no surprise that what follows is cultivating an attitude of thankfulness. That regardless of what these folk are facing, regardless of what you and I face in life, we can turn to God in thanksgiving.

Because, note, it's not 'give thanks *for* all circumstances' is it? It's 'Give thanks *in* all circumstances'. That in every circumstance you find yourself, you can thank God that he is working this for his eternal glory and our eternal good. And thankfulness follows a positive feedback cycle, doesn't it. You're having a bad day with your husband or your wife, or at work, or you have that sinking feeling as you realise you've blown it again in anger or sin, and the dark abyss opens in front of you and you can begin to spiral down. But if instead of sinking into that abyss you start to thank God for his faithfulness to you and his love that never changes, and for Christ who died for you, then as thankfulness rises in your heart, it begins to lift you up and out of the darkness, and you start to see all these others things you can be thankful for. And thankfulness breeds more thankfulness which breeds more and more thankfulness. And that breeds more joy and more prayer and more thankfulness still.

So it's no wonder that Paul then says in v18, 'For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' Now, there are times when you wonder, what is God's will for my life? Well, Paul answers that here. What is God's will for your life? It is that, *in Christ*, in all that Jesus has done for you, united with him, you would be rejoicing always, praying continually and thankful in all circumstances. That is the life God wants for you. And which of us would say 'no' to a joy-filled, prayerful, thankful life? The question is, how do you get there?

Well, before he answers that, he tells us one further thing that should mark our lives, as individuals and as churches.

God's Word for Your Life

Now, I say he says one further thing, in fact it's one thing made of 2 negative and 3 positive commands: v19-22: 'Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.'

Now a couple of weeks ago on the youth retreat, we did what we do every year: we built a big bonfire on the Saturday night, and everyone sat round drinking hot chocolate. And this year, after everyone else had gone back into the chalet, I was standing by the fire as Lukas started pouring water on it to put it out. And within the space of a minute or so all the light and all the heat had gone and we were standing there in the darkness, suddenly getting cold.

And Paul says, 'don't do that to the Holy Spirit in your life. Don't quench him. Don't snuff out his light, or pour water on his heat.'

Now, there are a number of ways you can do that, aren't there, but here Paul highlights one that these guys in Thessalonica were probably at risk of: v20, 'do not despise prophecies.'

Now, what does he mean by that? Well, we get a clue from his second letter to this same church. Listen to what he writes there, 'Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, *either by a spirit or a spoken word*, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come' (2 Thess 2:1-2). And so what seems to have been going on is that in all the speculation about the Lord Jesus' return there had been an overflow of prophecies, what Paul calls here 'spirits' or 'spoken words'.

And whilst the circumstances were different, the apostle John was clearly having to deal with something similar in his first letter, except in his case, it wasn't about the coming of the Lord Jesus, but about his full humanity and divinity.

Added to that, some commentators point out that at this time, there was a cultural and intellectual shift going on. Among Greek and Roman intellectuals, there was a shift away from believing in their own pagan prophecies, such as the oracle of Delphi, and so on the one hand you had people dismissing these supernatural things as nonsense, and on the other people defending it as genuine. And so in a culture where at least some were frowning on the whole concept of the supernatural, it wouldn't be a surprise if some of that culture had influenced the church, just as it can today.

And so Paul finds himself having to tell them not to despise prophecies, because the hard truth is that, then and now, stuff goes on that can leave you doing just that: despising prophecy. And in stamping out the bad, you smother everything, and throw the baby out with the bathwater, and cut yourself off from one of the means of God's encouragement to you.

So, rather than despise it, Paul says in v21, 'test everything'. So, when it comes to people saying they have some word from the Lord, whether that is a preacher expounding God's word, or someone coming with a word of encouragement or correction or direction, Paul says we aren't to dismiss it out of hand, or be gullible and blindly accept everything. We're to test it. And he says the same to the church at Corinth where he says they are to weigh carefully what is said. And the apostle John says the same, when he writes 'do not believe every spirit, *but test the spirits* to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1).

Which begs the question, how are we to do that?

Well Paul doesn't spell it out, here. But first Jesus, then Paul and John give us plenty to go on.

Firstly, look at the known character of the person. Jesus tells us 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognise them by their fruit' (Matt 7:15-16). So, this preacher who is claiming to speak God's word, look at his life and his conduct. Is he laying down his life for the flock? Is he feeding the sheep, or is he fleecing them? The person who comes to you with a supposed word from the Lord for you, is their life one of godliness, and integrity, that you can look up to and respect? Are the fruit of God's Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, evident in their lives? And if you don't know them well enough to tell, then that tells you something.

Secondly, does it do what it says on the tin? In 1 Cor 14:3, Paul says that 'the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.' Later on he says prophecy can lead to conviction of sin - it can expose the secrets of our hearts before God and ourselves. Well, does this word that someone is bringing you do that? Is it encouraging you to walk more closely with Jesus, or trust more deeply in him? Is it challenging you to grow in holiness?

I remember when I was a student, in my early 20s, and I was stood in church one morning singing the songs, feeling absolutely miserable. I was stuck in sin, and I knew what I needed to do to free myself from it, but I just didn't have the moral courage to do it. If you've been there, you know the kind of misery. And then a lady called Nancy, who I knew well from my homegroup, but who knew nothing of my situation, and who was standing behind me, tapped me on the shoulder. And she showed me her bible, and she said, 'I think the Lord has just given me this verse for you.' It was John 14:15, where Jesus says, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments…I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.' And I was just struck to the heart. I realised that God knew exactly what I was doing, and I knew in that moment what I had to do, and through that word, God gave me the courage to do it. It was God speaking through Nancy to get me to wake up to my sin. It was prophecy doing what it says on the tin.

Thirdly, does it glorify Jesus? Because that is always the Spirit's role. He is this bright, burning spotlight, whose beam is focused on Christ. And he never shines the spotlight of glory on us, or on a preacher, or on a so-called prophet. He always, and only makes much of Jesus. And in 1 John, John has plenty to say about that: the real thing always glorifies Christ.

Fourthly, is it wise? By which I mean, does it fit with wise advice you're getting from others whom you trust, which Scripture has lots to tell us about. Is it in keeping with the way the Lord is leading you in other ways?

On the last Sunday we were in the UK, before moving here, with all our bags packed, and the contract for this job signed, I was stood in church after the service, when a guy who had just discovered we were moving here came up to

me, and told me that the Lord had just told him that I was like an airline pilot, who was steering a wrong course, and that I needed to turn on the automatic pilot, and that would correct my course. Basically, he was saying, the Lord had told him that we were wrong to move to Switzerland. But testing that one was easy. I didn't really know this guy, though what I did know did not fill me with huge amounts of confidence, and it was totally at odds with how we had felt the Lord lead us here in multiple other ways, not least the wise advice of others I trusted. So, is what it is saying wise and in keeping with other guidance?

But fifthly, and crucially, does it conform to Scripture?

We've been doing some DIY jobs on our house, and one of the things that drives me crazy is that whoever built the house, did not build it with straight walls. You put a spirit level up against it and you adjust to what should be straight, and you think, 'I don't believe it! It's way out!' In the old days people would use a plumb-line, wouldn't they? We know this is straight, this is our guide, let's see if this thing we're measuring is. And God's written word is that plumbline, it is that spirit-level for anything that makes the claim as coming from the Lord – whether it's preaching, or a word of correction, or something that spontaneously comes to mind. Is it in line with this? Because we know this is straight, we know this is God's word.

And both John and Paul say it is the apostolic teaching and tradition, that determines what we are to believe, as Paul writes in 2 Thess 2:15, 'So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.' To the church in Galatia, Paul says that anyone who comes with any message that differs from the gospel of God's grace, should be totally ignored. In fact he goes further, he says they should be accursed. And John says that anything that disagrees with this apostolic teaching comes from a spirit of error. You see this is the final, authoritative, supreme and sufficient, word of God. This is the plumb line, the word against which all other words are tested.

And that explains why Paul says what he says, as he signs off, in v27 'I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.' *I put you on oath, as Christians, have this letter read in your meetings*… that's strong isn't it! No testing, no weighing, no sifting. This is God's word, and I want all of you to hear it and believe it and obey it. So whilst we are to test every other word, and hold on to the good and let go of the bad, with this word we can come everytime knowing that God is speaking to me.

We can know that as individuals, and we can know it as a church.

So in our individual lives and in our life together as God's church, Paul says we are to stay open to the Lord's voice speaking to us, and we are to respond with joy, with prayer and with thanksgiving.

But as we close, there's one question left: how can we do it? How can we be those who receive God's word, who don't quench his Spirit, and who rejoice and pray and thank him?

God's Power for Your Life
Look at Paul's closing prayer in v23-4, 'Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful: he will surely do it.'

You see the remarkable thing is that it is God who does it. It is God who works in us to sanctify us, to make us more like Jesus, to make us more joyful, prayerful, thankful. It is God who makes us more receptive to his word. And it is God who will preserve us and keep us until Jesus returns. And he does all that, spirit, soul and body: so there is no part of your life that he will leave untouched, that is outside of his power, where he is not competent to bring change and life and freedom. We can't do that, but he can. And so it's as we listen to him and put our trust in him that he does it, and we find the change happening.

And that is why, for all that these guys or you and I might face in life, Paul has this deep confidence. Because he knows that ultimately it's not down to them, and it's not down to you and me, to live this way. It's down to God, and so as we look to him to speak into and work in our lives, we can know that he is faithful and he will surely do it.