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Job descriptions are your boss's expectations with regard to your work. Job descriptions are very important and many of us learn that the hard way.

Years ago a young seminarian took a job at a plant and shrub nursery. He learned sometime later that the owner had been robbed by many of his past employees and decided to try a seminarian because they wanted an honest person. The only problem was that the seminarian knew nothing about nursery work,

The young seminarian discovered that the owners communicated the job description with short imperatives. On day one he was told to water the plants on the lot. He learned on day two that this was to be an everyday requirement. A few days later he was trained in

fertilizing the plants. The next day he learned that this was added to his daily duties. A short while later he learned to prune the plants and found that this too was to be part of his daily job.

It didn't take long for this young man to conclude that if he was going to survive he needed to consider that and responsibility given to him became part of his permanent, daily responsibility. Once he did that, his life got a whole lot easier.

Clearly defined job descriptions are important for all of us. Yet what is much more important is our life description. When it comes to your relationship with God, how many of you have a good idea of what your walk with God should be like? How many of you can say, "This is what God wants every Christian to be like?" Without a "Life Description" you may very well fall into the *Ephesians 4 Syndrome* in your walk, being "...tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine."

Many Christians find themselves tossed about by the winds of doctrine. One book says: "The essence of Christianity is NOT striving BUT abiding!" Another book says: "God helps those who help themselves!" Yet another book says: "Pray as though it all depended upon God, but live as though it all depended upon you." Which is correct? Wouldn't it be nice to have a clearly defined "Life Description" penned by God?... just a little section saying, *"This is what I want your walk to be like throughout the course of your lifetime!"*

1 Thessalonians 5 is that life description. Paul gives us a "Life Description"- or more specifically a declaration of God's will for the child of God as he/she works out their salvation! After giving three exhortations pertaining to our relationship with God, Paul wrote this:

1 Thessalonians 5:18b, "...for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

In other words, what Paul gives in vv. 16-18 is God's plan for every one of His children at all times! Paul tells us that our relationship with God should be characterized by joy.

1 Thessalonians 5:16, "Rejoice always."

While this isn't the shortest verse in the Bible (cf. John 11:35), it is close to it! Yet we ought NOT to conclude from this that this verse therefore is unimportant! In fact, this is one of thirty-five exhortations in Scripture pertaining to the Christian and the call for them to be characterized by joy!¹ As such, we conclude that this is an important command.

The first word is rejoice: *χαίρω* (*chairō*). The root is *χαρά* (*chara*) which is the Greek word for "joy." In Scripture the environment of joy is the compound realization that on account of our sin, we rightly deserve the wrath of God- hell. Yet, on account of God's grace, Christ went in our place on the cross and suffered for us the wages of our sin. As a result, in Christ we stand before God blameless and so forgiven — white as snow! And because of this we know

that our only wise and gracious God is working out His purpose and plan for us in and through all things!

When we come to this realization, the result is the deep-seated conviction of joy! Breaking it down, notice that joy/rejoicing has at least four elements to it

1. "Rejoicing" is defined as "joy expressed," and thus speaks of the pervasion of joy in every part of our life. Speaking of those trusting in Christ and because of which were persecuted, Peter said this:

1 Peter 1:8b, "...you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory."

We are NOT here talking about an emotion, but a conviction which pervades our entire being! Furthermore, we are NOT here talking about the experience of joy, BUT the expression of it! That is what "rejoicing" is all about; again *it is expressed joy!*

2. It is a virtue exclusive to the child of God.

Galatians 5:22, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..."

This means that "joy" is not something you and I work up... it is not an emotion enjoyed by all. It is fruit/benefit that comes from a saving relationship with Christ!

Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy IN THE HOLY SPIRIT."

Again, joy is a product of the working of the Spirit of God!

3. Thus, the BASIS for all rejoicing is the cross, the love-relationship God has established between the Christian and Himself, and the outworking of God's glorious will in our lives.

1 Peter 1:8: "And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him [this is talking about trust- not just for forgiveness, but in and throughout each moment of life], you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory."

As a fruit of the Spirit, joy results from the child of God gazing upon His Lord, beholding His cross, and trusting Him to bring about His perfect plan as promised in His word! When these are combined, joy is always the result!

4. With this we must see that the only hindrance to joy in the life of the child of God is unconfessed/unrepentant sin. Recall the words David prayed when he finally came

to repentance.

Psalms 51:12, “Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation...”

He does NOT pray for the restoration of his salvation (for that could never be lost). RATHER, he prays for the restoration of God’s joy! Sin robs the Christian of joy and so the ability to rejoice! And so “rejoicing” is the call to live in light of the greatness of God, His love for you, and His ongoing grace by which He continually is completing the work He began in you! It is to this reality that Paul here calls the child of God to give themselves! Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

Christian joy constantly flows from what the believer continually knows to be true about God and about his eternal, saving relationship to Him- regardless of circumstances. (Dr. John MacArthur, 2002, p. 184)²

When I think of the call to “rejoice,” I think of the victorious soldier in a Roman Triumph. In Paul’s day, one of the gifts the senate gave to a victorious war general was a Triumph. This was a celebration that could last as long as a day. It was much like a parade. The magistrates led off, followed by the senate, trumpeters, the spoils captured from the enemy, and a white ox for sacrifice. This then was followed by the conquered army marching in chains to their death in the arena. After this, came the victorious General in a four horse chariot. Standing next to him on the chariot in chains was the highest ranking officer from the conquered army (usually the general, if he was still alive). This was followed by the victorious general’s army which proudly marched behind. All of this was led by the priests of the temple, carrying urns of incense as an act of devotion to the gods. When the Triumph was over, the defeated army would either be executed or marched into the arena to die in gladiatorial competition.

With this background, listen to 2 Corinthians 2 where Paul references the Roman Triumph.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16a, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ [Paul pictures the Christian walk in terms of the victorious soldiers marching in a Triumph!!], and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. [Here Paul changes the metaphor, referencing the incense rising from the urns of the Priests...] For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death [as the captured soldiers marched to their death, the smell of the incense was the smell of death], to the other an aroma from life to life [as the victorious soldiers marched, the smell of the incense was the aroma of life].”

Isn’t this a great passage? It pictures the child of God as the soldiers of our victorious King Jesus- a victory in which we CO-REIGN IN LIFE!

And yet think with me, there is no question that participating in many Triumphs were Roman soldiers who fought less than valiantly, who shrunk back in battle, who stumbled and fell as a soldier, and whose error may even have cost the lives of others. Perhaps they had suffered injury and so were wounded and in pain. And yet all of these “setbacks” would have disappeared as they marched victoriously through Rome. Truly amongst the victors, THERE WERE NO DEFEATED SOLDIERS IN A TRIUMPH!³

And such is the case when it comes to the body of Christ! We began salvation as soldiers marching in Christ’s Triumph! And thus I exhort you, No matter how bad your life may become or how awful you may feel at any given moment, don’t forget, you reign victorious in Christ! As such we have so much over which to rejoice in the Lord! In fact, in the Bible we read of ten different things which prompted God’s people to “rejoice in the Lord.” Notice, it was because of:

- God’s righteous character, which, even during hardship and difficulty, He demonstrates so faithfully to believers. (cf. Psalms 28:7; cf. Nehemiah 8:10; Psalms 71:23; 89:16; Is. 61:10).
- Christ’s redemptive work, which derives from a gracious, loving, merciful, and compassionate God (Luke 2:10; 10:20; Romans 5:1–2, 11; 1 Peter 1:8–9), and from His infallible instruction (John 15:11; 16:30; 1 John 5:20).
- The ministry of the Holy Spirit on our behalf (Acts 10:44; Romans 14:17; cf. 8:14–27).
- The vast array of spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ (cf. Ephesians 1:3–4; Philippians 4:13, 19; Colossians 2:9–14; 2 Peter 1:3).
- God’s providence as He works all things unto our benefit (Romans 8:28–30; James 1:2–4; Psalms 107:7).
- The promise of future glory (cf. Psalms 16:8–11; Matthew 5:12; Luke 10:20; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 1:18–21; 3:20; Jude 24).
- Answered prayer (Psalms 66:20; 116:1, 17; 118:21; John 16:24).
- The gift of God’s Word (Colossians 3:16; cf. Psalms 19:7–11; 119:14, 111, 162; Jeremiah 15:16).
- The privilege of genuine fellowship (1 Thessalonians 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:4; Philemon 7; 2 John 12).
- The saving proclamation of the gospel (Acts 15:3; cf. Philippians 1:18).

As we gaze upon these truths and value them, we will “rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.” You say, even in the bad times? Even when we suffer setbacks? In fact, notice the qualification:

1 Thessalonians 5:16, “rejoice always.”

Always, πάντοτε (pantote); literally means, “at all times” or “in all times,” and is translated as “ever,” “evermore,” or “always.” Combined with the call to “rejoice” we understand that Paul here is NOT saying that we are to rejoice *ON ACCOUNT OF* all things; RATHER we are to

rejoice *IN* all things!

When trial, grief, or difficulty descends upon us, it is easy to read Paul's command here and say, *"That's easy for you to say! You don't know my suffering!"* Yet any who might be tempted to say that here is ignorant of Paul and the Thessalonians' suffering. One of the first things that sticks out in this Epistle is that Paul and the Thessalonians were under great duress when this command was written! Recall, Thessalonica enjoyed the status of being a free city of Rome. During the civil war of Rome in which Augustus rose to power (42 BC), the city sided with Augustus. Thus Octavian awarded to Thessalonica the status of a "free city" which cemented their allegiance to Caesar!

That is why when we read in v. 9 that the Thessalonians "...turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God," we understand that this would have meant the rejection of the cult of Caesar *which would have made the church an enemy of the state!* That explains the charge brought against the church leaders of Thessalonica after Paul and his companions left.

Acts 17:7b, "...they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

Secondly, the Jewish leadership in Thessalonica had a hatred for Paul and zealously not only to attack Paul, but to chase him around the ancient world! Recall, the Thessalonian Jews rabidly pursued Paul from Thessalonica all the way to Berea (*50 miles away!*)! Their disposition resembled that of Paul's before he was saved. Paul spoke of himself prior to salvation:

Acts 26:11, "And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."

This is how the nonbelieving Jews in Thessalonica pursued Paul... and then the Thessalonians!

1 Thessalonians 2:14-15a, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out..."

The passion and hatred which spurred on the unbelieving Jews of Palestine to kill Christ was quickly directed at His followers upon Christ's death. And Paul vividly remembering this said that the Thessalonians suffer in exactly the same way! We see it further in 2 Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 1:4, "Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure."

And so just like in the days of Esther when the state legalized the persecution of God's

people, so it was in Thessalonica! In Thessalonica attacking Christians not only was legal, but encouraged!

So this epistle was NOT written from a palace and sent to ones living in ease and plenty. It was penned by a man who at that moment was the object of ridicule and attack, and it was sent to a church suffering greatly on account of their love for Christ! It was in this context that Paul gave the command of our passage: “Rejoice at all times!”

Again, how could this be possible? It is only possible because the source of our joy as Christians is NOT our circumstances, BUT the knowledge of God’s character and His disposition toward us! In light of this, notice the description of the child of God in Scripture—he is “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10)! Gordon Fee wrote this:

This is not a sugar-coated call for putting on a happy face in the midst of difficulties. Here is a church that is undergoing severe hardship because of its faith in Christ. God’s will for such a community, both as individuals and as they gather for worship, is that as a matter of first importance they continue to exalt Christ by rejoicing, with him as the focus. (Fee, 2009, pp. 214-215)

What an important command for us! Americans tend to believe the world revolves around them. Sadly, Christianity in America has followed this lead such that most in the church believe that salvation is about them, their comfort, their welfare, their convenience, and so their triumph. Accordingly, to encounter suffering in the slightest form frequently leads the Christian to doubt God, His goodness, and His promises!

Yet listen to the word of God and come to see that suffering and hardship for the believer ought NOT to be thought upon as the exception, BUT rather the rule. Speaking of His sinning people God promised:

Hosea 2:14-16a, “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her. Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as [this was the burial place of Achan who after sinning against God was crushed beneath a pile of rocks. Accordingly, from Achan on down to the contemporaries of Hosea, *Achor was a name of disgrace!* Yet grace radically transforms shame, doesn’t it? Notice, the ‘valley of Achor’- this wilderness- would become...] a door of hope [a portal of hope, anticipation, and so blessing!!!]. And she will sing there [*in the wilderness!!!*] as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt.”

From this we have seen that God’s redeeming work brings the child of God to the wilderness, which is the epitome of trial and difficulty. Yet here God provides a portal of hope, healing, and fellowship with the Lord. And thus we read Philippians:

Philippians 1:29-30, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me.”

Why is it that God saved us to suffer? Because it is there, in the wilderness of suffering, that Christ dwells with His people! Truly, we are as the burning bush which though set on fire was not consumed! Why? Because God dwells with us! And so listen to the exhortation found in Hebrews.

Hebrews 13:12-13, “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate [Christ was NOT crucified in the city of Jerusalem, BUT outside... *in the wilderness*. What therefore is the calling?]. Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.”

The wilderness metaphor is used throughout the Bible as a picture of that place where God brings His people! Here they are kept from the alluring temptations of the things of this life and so are enabled both to behold and enjoy their Savior (cf. Hosea 2:6-7)! May we understand, *if we were for slaughter, God would fatten us in this life!* But as we are for glorifying and enjoying the Lord, we shall ever and always in this life be tempered unto this good and perfect calling!

And so as the Thessalonians encountered bitter providence after bitter providence, Paul called them to take their eyes off their circumstances, off the present, off the pain, and place them on the Lord, His character, and His plan! If we do that, “the valley of Achor will become a portal of hope!”

It is interesting that the call to “rejoice” here precedes the call both to “pray” and to “give thanks.” The order is NOT accidental! If you and I fail to “rejoice in the Lord”, our prayer life will be hindered and we most certainly won’t be thankful in all things! Expressed joy in the Lord leads to so many Christian virtues. Leon Morris put it this way:

The various derivatives of joy occur with startling frequency throughout the New Testament. The word for ‘grace’, for example, is from this root, as are one of the words for ‘to forgive’, one for ‘to give thanks’, and another for ‘gifts of the Spirit’. (Morris, 2009, p. 104)

Central to all of these Christian virtues is “rejoicing in the Lord!” To fail in this regard will result in a struggle when it comes to forgiveness, gratitude, the exercise of a spiritual gift, and the giving of grace and mercy to others! In fact, listen to the caution Nehemiah gave to the returning exiles who were participating in Covenant Renewal with their God.

Nehemiah 8:10b, “Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Lack this grace, and your worship and service in the Lord will be compromised!

Works Cited

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End Note(s)

¹ Cf. also Deut. 12:18; Nehemiah 8:10; Psalms 2:11; 5:11; 32:11; 68:3; 100:2; 132:16; Is. 29:19; Joel 2:23–24; Hab. 3:17–18; Matthew 5:10–12; Luke 6:22–23; 10:20; John 16:20–22; cf. Psalms 16:8–9; 21:6; 28:7; 132:16; Is. 35:10; 55:12; 56:7; Zech. 9:9; Acts 5:41; Romans 15:13; 2 Corinthians 10:17; Ephesians 5:9; Philippians 2:17–18; 4:4; Colossians 1:24; James 1:2; 5:13; 1 Peter 1:6; 4:13.

² G. K. Beale defined joy according, "...joy is not primarily an 'emotional high' consisting only of 'feelings.' Rather, the focus is on an inner, abiding attitude or disposition of taking pleasure in recognizing that whatever one encounters, including trials, is God's will... 'joy' is tied to God's end-time victory over evil through Jesus Christ. Whether in war or sports, people aligned with the winning side experience great joy. How much more is it true for us who are represented by Jesus Christ and his victory at the cross and resurrection, which will be culminated when he returns again?" (*1–2 Thessalonians*, pp. 167, 168)

³ R. C. Stone described the privilege of marching in a Triumph, "The triumphator was privileged to appear in special dress at public gatherings, and his name was inscribed on the list of persons so honored." (*Encyclopedia of The Bible*, "Triumph")