

REJOICE ALWAYS

The Shortest Verse in the Bible — A Sign of Life in the Ruins

Pr. Abe Acosta-Newball

1 Thessalonians 5:16 • Philippians 4:4

I. Introduction — Silence, Then a Shout

There is a silence that speaks louder than any siren.

Picture it: a city broken in an instant. Concrete turned to dust, walls folded like paper, streets no longer streets but rivers of rubble. And in the middle of it all, a rescuer lifts his hand and calls for quiet. Every engine stops. Every voice stills. Every breath is held. Because in that silence, one word could mean the difference between a body recovered and a life restored.

If there is someone alive — say something.

And then it happens. A knock. A cry. A whisper rising up through broken concrete like a seed pushing through soil that was never meant to let anything grow again. And the silence — that heavy, desperate silence — shatters into shouting. Fists rise into the air. Grown men weep. Strangers embrace like family. Because somebody who was buried just proved they were not dead.

That is the picture on our banner this morning. A man with his arms raised — not in surrender, but in triumph — standing in the ruins of an earthquake, celebrating that life is still there.

Church, I believe that image preaches a sermon by itself. Because the apostle Paul writes to a people who were no strangers to ruins — a persecuted congregation, buried under grief, under fear, under uncertainty about tomorrow — and he doesn't tell them to be quiet. He doesn't tell them to be strong. He tells them, in two words that ask for nothing but a confession of life:

Πάντοτε χαίρετε. “Rejoice always.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:16

It is the shortest verse in Paul's letters — but it is not a small command. It is the shout that rises after the silence. It is the sign that life still remains under the rubble of our circumstances.

Rejoicing is not the absence of ruins. Rejoicing is the proof that something inside the ruins is still alive.

This morning we are not going to pretend the rubble isn't real. We are going to ask the same question that rescuer asked over broken buildings and buried lives — and we are going to ask it of our own hearts:

If there is life in you — say something.

II. Rejoicing in the Pauline Letters

If you only heard the command, you might think Paul wrote these words from a comfortable chair, in a quiet season, with nothing pressing on his chest. But that is not where "rejoice" was born.

A. Born Among Ruins

1 Thessalonians 5:16; Acts 17:1–10; Philippians 4:4; Philippians 1:12–14

Paul writes "Rejoice always" to the Thessalonians — a church only weeks old, already suffering persecution so intense that Paul himself was driven out of the city by an angry mob. He writes to people grieving loved ones who had died before Christ's return, wondering whether hope was even still standing.

And when he writes to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice," he is not writing from freedom. He is writing from a Roman prison cell, chained to a guard, awaiting a trial that could end in execution. This is not a man rejoicing because life is easy. This is a man rejoicing from underneath the rubble of his own circumstances.

The Adventist pioneers understood this kind of joy well. Many of them wrote and preached from seasons of disappointment, opposition, and loss — and it was precisely in those seasons that the Advent hope became, in their words, not a comfort that ignored suffering but a confidence that outlasted it. Joy, for the early Sabbatarian believers, was never proof that trouble had ended. It was proof that trust had not.

B. A Confession, Not a Feeling

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18; Nehemiah 8:10

The Greek word Paul uses — *chairō* — isn't a fleeting emotion, like a smile that fades when the room gets cold. It is a settled orientation of the whole person. It doesn't ask, "How do you feel right now?" It asks, "*What do you know to be true, regardless of how you feel?*"

This matters greatly for how we understand sanctification. In the Adventist understanding of growth in Christ, the will stands at the center of character — feelings follow choices; they do not lead them. Paul is not commanding an emotion Thessalonica cannot control. He is commanding a decision they can make: to fix the will on what God has already done and is still doing, even while the feelings are still catching up. Rejoicing, then, is an act of the sanctified will before it is ever a sensation of the heart.

C. Said Twice, On Purpose

Philippians 4:4

Notice — in Philippians the word is doubled: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Paul doesn't say it once and move on. He repeats it, presses on it — like a rescuer who calls into the silence not once but again, because he needs to be sure the answer wasn't imagined.

Joy, for the believer, is not a one-time shout. It is a sound we must keep making, again and again, every time the rubble tries to convince us we have gone silent.

D. Located "In the Lord"

Philippians 4:4; John 15:11; Psalm 16:11

And both times, the command comes anchored to a location: "Rejoice in the Lord." Not rejoice in your circumstances. Not rejoice because the building is still standing. Rejoice in the Lord — because He is the one thing that remains constant whether the walls are up or the walls are down.

This is a critical distinction in Adventist theology of the Christian life: our joy is Christocentric, not circumstantial. It is rooted in the character of God as revealed at the cross and vindicated at the empty tomb — not in the shifting condition of our health, our finances, or our nation. The city can collapse. The chains can tighten. But the ground beneath our joy never moves, because the ground was never the city. It was always Him.

III. The Great Controversy Behind the Command

Job 1:6–12; Revelation 12:10, 17; 1 Thessalonians 2:18

Why would Paul give a suffering church such an audacious command? Because, in the larger biblical story that Adventists have always emphasized, **every act of Christian joy is a small but real act of resistance in a cosmic conflict between Christ and the accuser.**

Scripture describes Satan as the one who stands "before God day and night" to accuse God's people, and as the one who hindered Paul's own travel plans to Thessalonica. In that light, unshakeable joy is not sentimentality — it is spiritual warfare. Every time a believer rejoices "in the Lord" instead of collapsing into despair, that believer is testifying, in the middle of a battlefield, that God's character has not failed and God's promises have not lapsed. Joy becomes evidence in the great controversy — proof, offered before watching worlds, that God is worth trusting even in the rubble.

This is why the man in the photograph raises both hands. It is not a passive gesture. It is a declaration aimed outward, into the wreckage, for everyone — rescuer and bystander alike — to see and hear: life has won this round.

IV. Corporate Joy — The Church as the Rescue Team

1 Thessalonians 5:11; Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:2

Notice something easy to miss in the photograph: the man raising his hands is not alone. Around him are rescuers — people who came looking, who called into the silence, who were ready to dig with their bare hands the moment they heard a sound.

This is the church's calling. Paul instructs the Thessalonians, "Comfort each other and edify one another," and the Romans, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." In Adventist ecclesiology, the church is never merely a building or an institution; it is understood as a body — and increasingly, in our own generation, as a community entrusted with a rescue mission, calling into the silence of a dying world, "If there is someone alive in there — say something."

Our corporate worship, our Sabbath fellowship, our prayer meetings — these are the moments when we listen for signs of life in one another, and when we answer for each other when someone is too buried in grief to shout for themselves.

V. The Blessed Hope — Rejoicing Toward the Coming

1 Thessalonians 4:16–18; Titus 2:13; Revelation 21:4

We cannot unpack rejoicing in 1 Thessalonians without noticing what comes just one chapter earlier. Paul comforts the grieving Thessalonians with the promise of the resurrection and the Lord's return, and he closes that section with the words, "Therefore comfort one another with these words."

For the Seventh-day Adventist believer, this is not incidental — it is central. Our joy is not merely a coping mechanism for the present; it is forward-leaning hope anchored in the certainty of Christ's soon return, when, as John writes, God "will wipe away every tear," and there will be "no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying." The rescuer's shout in the rubble is a small, imperfect echo of that final, complete rescue — the day every grave gives up its dead and every ruin is undone forever.

This is why we can rejoice always, even now: not because the wreckage isn't real, but because the wreckage is not the last word. Resurrection is.

VI. How Do We Actually "Rejoice Always"?

Philippians 4:6–7; Psalm 34:1; Habakkuk 3:17–18

Practically, how does a suffering believer obey this command without pretending?

First, we rejoice by remembering rather than denying. Paul's letters never ask believers to deny the earthquake — He ask believers to remember Who stands over the earthquake. Habakkuk models this precisely: **even when the fig tree does not blossom and the fields yield no food, "yet I will rejoice in the Lord."** The joy is not because of the circumstance; it survives in spite of it.

Second, we rejoice by praying instead of panicking. Paul pairs the command to rejoice with the command not to be anxious but to bring everything to God "with thanksgiving," promising a peace that "surpasses all understanding." Prayer is how the shout gets from the ruins to the surface.

Third, we rejoice out loud, in community, so someone listening for signs of life can hear us. Praise, in Scripture, is rarely private. It is meant to be heard — because someone nearby may need to know that survival is possible.

VII. Invitation — Say Something

So this morning, church, the same question hangs over this sanctuary that hung over that ruined city.

If there is someone alive — say something.

Maybe you have been buried a long time. Maybe grief, or sickness, or fear, or failure has piled concrete on top of you until you weren't sure anyone was still listening. Maybe you have forgotten what your own voice sounds like.

Paul is not asking you to shout because everything is fine. He is asking you to shout because you are still alive in Christ, and the world needs to hear it. The resurrection is coming. The Rescuer has already climbed into the rubble to find you — He did it at the cross, and He is doing it now by His Spirit.

So lift your hands. Let your answer rise. Let the silence break.

Rejoice always. — 1 Thessalonians 5:16

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