

Theme: KEPT FOR CHRIST

- I. With the attitude of living faith
- II. With our actions living his Word
- III. With assurance of eternity

“Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (NIV 2011).

Rejoice always. ¹⁷ Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸ In everything give thanks. For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not extinguish the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ But test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Keep away from every kind of evil. ²³ 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. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

You who are in Christ Jesus,

He didn’t listen. They warned him not to travel alone when the temperature dipped below -50. It was his first winter in Yukon Territory, but he was confident in his ability to return to camp safely. He heeded neither the veterans’ warnings nor the signs from his dog. Numerous times he narrowly avoided shallow ice until he finally fell in knee-deep. He needed to build a fire to warm himself in the merciless cold. Despite multiple attempts, he failed. He paid the ultimate price for his vanity.

That’s the basic plot of Jack London’s story *To Build a Fire*. The story reminds us overconfidence can be fatal. Still, it’s fascinating to think, in the right circumstances, a destructive force like fire can preserve life. In God’s Word today, we see the Holy Spirit described like a fire; he both informs and preserves our spiritual life. As we prepare for Christmas, at church we rely on the Spirit in preparation for Christ’s second coming. God ensures we are being KEPT FOR CHRIST.

“**Rejoice always.**” Really? Always? It’s easy enough to rejoice when the Packers win the Super Bowl, the baby comes home from the hospital, or when I find \$100 on the ground; but *always*? I’m supposed to rejoice when people openly insult me for my Christian faith, the surgery goes nothing like planned, and we commit the baby to the ground, ashes to ashes, dust to dust? Ridiculous!

No, God isn’t saying we need to deny all bad things, and just smile through it. Rejoicing or joy means more than happiness. Paul wrote this letter to Christians whom he served as pastor for three weeks before such a violent persecution broke out that Paul had to head out of town. Even then, Paul instructs us to rejoice!

When we recognize how hard it is to rejoice at all times, we begin to recognize we also need to “**pray without ceasing.**” If we’re honest with ourselves, we don’t live every moment of every day filled with joy, so we go to the throne of God at all times until God has given us every one of the things he promised. You don’t need to bow your head, close your eyes, fold your hands, lift your hands, to pray without ceasing. You don’t need every conscious thought to be a prayer to God. Flood God’s throne with your unceasing prayers. Take to him big things and small. The issue you were struggling with at work last week. The thing that had you worried this week. The causes of joy and sorrow. Ask for joy, but also recognize the many reasons you have to give thanks, not least of all that God always hears and answers your prayers.

“In everything give thanks.” Hold on! Repeat! We heard this already a couple weeks ago! And we have as much reason to give thanks today as we did at Thanksgiving. We give thanks because God promises to make good even those things that appear bad. So we rejoice at all times, in all circumstances for everything.

“This is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” The attitude of faith living under God rejoices, prays, and gives thanks. God wants to make us jump for joy, persist in prayer, and generally grateful. Shouldn’t that give us reason enough to adopt that attitude? Think of the parent who calms the child after a nasty fall, “You’re okay; I’ve got you now.” For many a child, that’s enough to convince them they are unharmed. Similarly, our God assures us in his Word he will KEEP us joyful, constant in prayer, and thankful in us until CHRIST comes.

“It only takes a spark to get a fire going.” People in California know all too well, but not all fire is destructive. Fire gives light and warmth, which, when used properly, can also preserve life. We often use a fire to cook food so it doesn’t make us sick. We light Advent candles to prepare for the Christ’s coming at Christmas.

God tells us to KEEP one fire burning FOR CHRIST’s return. **“Do not extinguish the Spirit.”** The Holy Spirit, who brings us to faith, spreads the warmth of God’s love and the light of his will. Where do we find the Spirit’s fire at work, and how can we KEEP it burning FOR CHRIST?

Have you ever wished you could consult the crystal ball or get God on the line for life’s tough decisions? In the days when I can look up any answer to any question on command with just a few keystrokes, it seems tedious to search for answers. But God instructs us, **“Do not treat prophecies with contempt.”** To treat prophecies with contempt is to extinguish the Spirit, because the Holy Spirit inspired these prophecies. If the Spirit is fire, then prophecy—the Word of God—is the fuel. But you’ve heard it all before. The preacher hasn’t said anything new in years. I just don’t get anything out of it. I’ve never read it and heard God telling me what Christmas gifts to buy! Or you’re hearing for the first time, and it’s all so confusing. There are 10,000 excuses for putting God’s Word lower on the totem pole of priority. We extinguish the Spirit when we plug our ears to the Word, close our eyes to reading it, stamp our feet from coming to church. Without the Spirit at work in the Word, we will not be KEPT blameless FOR CHRIST’s return.

The clock reads 4; quitting time’s at 5. No one will notice if you putz around a few minutes here and there. You’ll get paid the same whether you work with all your might or you dilly-dally. So you coast to the end of the day.

Spiritually, there is no coasting. Your sinful nature is constantly trying to starve you of God’s Word. Your enemy the devil always has his scope set on you, finger covering the trigger. He doesn’t need to shoot if you don’t open your Bible. And his allies, false prophets, claim to teach about God. They preach a god you want or no god at all. They say many things that make sense. Their golden lips hide rows of sharp teeth, all the better to devour you. If you coast, they’ll be there, ready to take you down to hell with them.

But don’t take my word for it. **“Test everything. Hold on to the good. Keep away from every kind of evil.”** Compare everything you hear spoken in the name of God to the Word of God. Don’t stop there. Test everything! Don’t just believe the first person you hear, or go to sources you know will tell you what you want to hear. Dig deeper. Examine everything. There is no truth that is true outside of God. Whatever is good, KEEP FOR CHRIST’s return. Avoid everything evil. Don’t go down that path. For that level of discernment, you need hours and hours in the Word of God.

Although we desperately need this Word of God for our spiritual lives, we all too often turn to it as though it were the last place we expected to find answers. Or we put in half an effort. We test only those we don’t trust; otherwise, we assume we’re always right and everyone is always wrong. We coast

on what we know, never growing, never getting any deeper. And slowly, the fire starts to shrink. There's no coasting in faith; you're either growing or shrinking until the end.

So who can ensure the fire will be KEPT going FOR CHRIST? *We* can't. Paul knew that, so he offered a wish, the prayer of every pastor, the prayer of Christians for each other: **“May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.”** God isn't done making you grow. We pray he would finish so we are completely sanctified—totally set apart for God. Only the God of peace can do this. The God of peace brings us peace, spiritual well-being. He comes to us in his Word, pointing us to the peace he himself won for us, peace that KEEPS US FOR CHRIST and in CHRIST. So Paul's prayer, and ours, continues.

“May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus.” Do you remember Tide To-Go pens? They work great for those of us who seem to hold a vendetta against keeping clothes unstained. The To-Go pens make sure that, no matter where you are or what you've done, you can get the stain out. Much like a Tide To-Go pen, Jesus is always with us. He gets all the spots and stains of sin out. So you will be spotless, blameless, wearing the whitest of white robes, whiter than any bleach can make us, when he comes again. We pray that, when that day comes, our whole being will *be kept* blameless. That's passive voice. We aren't the ones doing the action. Nothing we can do can keep ourselves blameless. We cannot KEEP ourselves FOR CHRIST.

Jesus *can*. **“The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”** While we are constantly keeping watch for the Advent of Christ, we also know what kind of God he is. Jesus lived blamelessly. No one could accurately accuse him of any wrongdoing. He endured the cross for the joy ahead of him. He offered prayers and petitions with fervent cries. He gave thanks for everything. He spread the fire of the Spirit. He had God's Word at his fingertips. All to make you blameless, so no one can accuse you of doing any wrongdoing. He was faithful in making us blameless, so he will be faithful in keeping you blameless.

When our sins overwhelm us, we look to our faithful God, the God of peace. He gives us peace, the forgiveness of sins. He keeps his promises. God isn't out to get you or going to hold a grudge. He will keep us blameless. That fills us with joy, even in the hard times. It's a reason for thanks in the darkest of dark places and the fuel for our prayers. It's why we keep reading this book we've read so much. Here we encounter God himself, and he lights his fire in us.

“It only takes a spark to get a fire going and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing. That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it. You spread His love to everyone; you want to pass it on.” Don't suffer from the pride of thinking you know the Bible well enough or that your relationship with Jesus is good enough. Light the fire. Keep it going. Light the world on fire with the love of God. He is faithful. He will do it. He will KEEP you blameless at CHRIST's return. Amen.

“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. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (EHV).