

▲ Personal Bible Study, Part 2 ▲

Example of the Method to study 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Read the passage in at least 2 translations.

ESV 1Thess 5:17 Pray without ceasing.

NIV 1 Thess 5:17 Pray continually.

NASB 1 Thess 5:17 Pray without ceasing.

NLT 1 Thess 5:17 Never stop praying.

What questions come up as you read the passage? (Add to the list whenever questions come up.)

Am I really supposed to be talking to God all the time, even when I'm doing other things?
How can a person really live their life – work, talk to other people, read the Word, ponder life, etc – if they are always “praying”?

Context – “context is king”

Immediate context – what verses and topics covered just before and after the passage?

Before:

1Thess 5:9 *For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. 12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. 16 Rejoice always,*

After:

1Thess 5:18 *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

Summary: 1Thess 5:9 *For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ... 11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up... 12 We ask you, brothers... And we urge you, brothers... 17 pray without ceasing... 23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely...*

Like brackets, Paul speaks of salvation in the beginning of this section and sanctification at the end of it. All the commands in between the brackets flow from the fact of our salvation, for which God has destined us in His mercy. Because He has done such a great thing, we should strive to carry out the commands that naturally, logically flow from it, as Romans

12:1 says: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

General context – where does the passage fall in an outline of the book?

Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:689-690

OUTLINE

- I. Salutation and Greeting (1:1)
- II. Personal Commendations and Explanations (1:2-3:13)
 - A. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians (1:2-10)
 - B. Reminders for the Thessalonians (2:1-16)
 - C. Concerns for the Thessalonians (2:17-3:13)
- III. Practical Instructions and Exhortations (4:1-5:24)
 - A. Christian living (4:1-12)
 - B. The Rapture (4:13-18)
 - C. Personal watchfulness (5:1-11)
 - D. Church life (5:12-15)
 - E. Holy living (5:16-24)
 - 1. Personal living (5:16-18)
 - 2. Corporate living (5:19-22)
 - 3. Divine enablement (5:23-24)
- IV. Conclusion (5:25-28)
 - A. Personal appeals (5:25-27)
 - B. Benediction (5:28)

What insight do you gain from the context? It is a command on how to live in right response to our salvation (1 Thess 5:9). Rather than something to be taken purely literally, which would mean we are always to be rejoicing, praying and giving thanks all at the same time (along with other things as well), it seems that Paul desires this to be the backdrop of the Thessalonians' lives. Not that they stop doing anything else, but that in the back of their minds is always an attitude of rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving – as if they are never out of sight of the immensity of their salvation, God's mercy to them and His sovereignty. It is an attitude of the presence of God.

History

What circumstances surrounded the writing of the book? (author, date, audience, purpose)

Wiersbe, Warren W.: The Bible Exposition Commentary. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989

One of Paul's earliest letters to a church with specific problems. Paul and several others had preached in the synagogue in Thessalonica for several weeks and within a short time, a church was established. Paul then went to Athens, leaving Timothy and Silas there to minister to the young church. Timothy later joined Paul at Corinth and reported on the church, which motivated Paul to write 1 Thess.

The church's problems included: *members [who] were not respecting and honoring their spiritual leaders as they should (1 Thes. 5:12–13). Others were refusing to work, arguing that the soon-coming of the Lord made this the logical thing to do (2 Thes. 3:6ff). There was some confusion in their public services that also needed correcting (1 Thes. 5:19–21)...*

What insight do you gain from the history?

The church had specific challenges, some of which included not responding correctly and appropriately to the Gospel. "*Pray without ceasing*" is one of the commands Paul gives them to help them understand what it looks like to respond appropriately.

Genre

Is it a New Testament epistle?

Author typically wrote w/in a certain format, for a purpose, to a person/people

For what purpose and to whom did this author write?

Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989

First Thessalonians is a letter from a spiritual father to his children. Paul pictured the church as a family (the word "brethren" or "brother" is used nineteen times in the first letter and nine times in the second), and he reminded them of what God did for them through his ministry.

What insight does this give you? Paul cares about them a great deal. His commands to the Thessalonians then are not those of a tyrant to his subjects, but those of a passionate father to children he loves beyond what words can express (1 Thess 2:7-8). Our obedience, then, should not be grudging and frustrated because the command seems so hard, but rather willing and with a good attitude because the One who gives such commands loves us and therefore wills what is best for us, and gives His commands to that end.

Literary analysis

What is the main phrase (independent clause) of the passage? *Pray*

How are the other phrases (dependent clauses) related to it? "*Without ceasing*" describes how we should pray.

What conjunctions tie the passage together (don't use NIV for this)? NA

How do the conjunctions impact the meaning of the passage? NA

Are there special features like repetition, switches in verb tense, or switches in person/people addressed or involved (like the switch from "them" to "you")? No.

What insight do these answers give you into the passage? NA

Word study

What are the important words or phrases?

pray without ceasing, pray continually

How are they translated in different translations?

pray without ceasing, pray continually

Where else is this word or phrase used in the Bible? I'll look up only "without ceasing" because "Pray" is used all over the place! So I'll focus on "without ceasing."

Romans 1:9 *For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that **without ceasing** I mention you*

1Thess 1:2 *We give thanks to God always for all of you, **constantly** mentioning you in our prayers,*

1Thess 2:13 *And we also thank God **constantly** for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*

What does the word in the original language mean? (use a bible dictionary such as Strong's or Thayer's or Brown-Driver-Brigg's, available online, free)

Strong's

uninterruptedly, that is, without omission (on an appropriate occasion): - without ceasing.

Thayer's

without intermission, incessantly, without ceasing

What insight does this give you into the passage?

These verses seem to point to a consciousness of God's presence.

Strong's "without omission (on an appropriate occasion)" points out that we should never miss praying when an appropriate occasion arrives. That is, never miss praying before meals or during your morning time with God or any time we face temptation, etc.

One use of a present tense verb can describe an action which is "repeated at intervals" or one which is "habitually occurring". For example I might say, "my husband and I have never stopped going to church." I don't mean that we are constantly on our way to church, but that we have gone every Sunday. It is something that we repeat at intervals. It is also a customary habit for us. So it might be with this instance of "without ceasing."

Parallel and related passages

Luke 18:1 *And he told them a parable to the effect **that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.** 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. 3 And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' 4 For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" 6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? 8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily*

The verb "to be praying" is present tense.

The woman in the parable did not live with the judge but oriented her life in order to get from him what she wanted.

Rom 12:12 *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, **be constant in prayer.***

Be constant: be loyal to, attach oneself to, associate closely with; serve personally, wait on (Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament)

Eph 6:16 *In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 **praying at all times** in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, 19 and also for me...*

At all times: in all seasons, or points of time or periods of time. Not ongoing through time, but distinct iterations of time.

What insight does this give you into the passage?

Prayer should be a habit, something that we do very often. Coming to God with our requests and “supplication” should be something we do many times each day, consistently over the days, weeks and years. It should also be something that we do at every opportunity: meals, in conversation with friends, during devotional time each morning with God, etc. Romans 12:12 also presents an element of mentally or spiritually attaching oneself to God with a loyalty or association that never departs from His presence. It is reminiscent of Brother Lawrence’s “practice of the presence of God.” The Luke passage also presents elements of a life-orientation. The woman came very frequently to the judge, but continued to live her life. Paul continued to live his life despite how frequently (“constantly”) he remembered believers in prayer. We also need to live our lives while always being aware of God’s presence with us and to be often in conscious, intentional interaction with Him.

Theology

Are there problems that the passage raises when set beside other passages?

It is consistent with other passages.

How do you resolve them, assuming that the Bible does not contradict itself? NA

Summary

In one sentence, state the basic meaning of the passage in your own words.

We need to always being aware of God’s presence with us and to be often in conscious, intentional interaction with Him.

How does this relate to the story / history of salvation?

Once we do ask Jesus into our lives and become followers of Him, He gives us the Holy Spirit who is always with us. God, therefore, *is* always with us. Praying without ceasing is merely an acknowledgement or a right response to that fact.

How does the passage correct an error or problem in you today?

We do not pray nearly as much or often as we could or should! We are not constantly conscious of God’s presence with us in every moment, with all the implications that has for all the details of our lives!

What promise or encouragement does the passage have for you today?

There is not a detail of my life He misses – not a single thought, attitude, intention, motivation, decision, fear, problem, etc. He knows it all. And looking at that fact sandwiched between His unfathomable love and His complete sovereignty, it only makes sense that whenever my mind is not otherwise engaged, I would be praying. And even when I am pondering anything, I should be doing so with the awareness that He is listening. The next logical step would be to ponder with Him, that is, to pray and to seek to listen to what He is saying in reply. Even if it only lasts ten minutes while I drive to the store or while I fold laundry*. He delights to hear it and it gives me a much more truthful, peaceful perspective, even when it presents challenge, because it would keep me closer to doing His will in every moment.

*The challenge is to balance that with doing all things “as unto Christ” which connotes an excellence. Many things take a great deal of concentration in order to achieve excellence. Flying a fighter jet is an example. Yet even while maintaining such intense focus on what one is doing at any given time, it is possible to have an awareness of God’s presence in the back of one's mind. Certainly this awareness does bring a backdrop of peace even in the midst of danger.

Application

What concrete change is God asking you to make as a result of studying this passage?

Be more diligent in praying, or at least being aware of God’s presence, at all times whenever the opportunity arises.