

The big – wide – picture

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 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. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 ESV)

We learn pretty quickly in life that you when you understand the context or big picture of a situation, event, even a person (the background) then we are better able to live, make good choices, and have positive outcomes.

Take Australians and droughts and dams and water. It is instinctive in Australia to hoard water, store it, don't waste it. So why earlier in February this year did the authorities release 1 year's supply of water and last month about 2 month's worth of water went through the Wivenhoe floodgates? Seems daft in a country plagued with so many droughts – until you remember that last year's summer caused some of the worst floods in the area and this year's weather predictions are saying that it will be another very wet summer.

I once read the story of a person who was getting increasingly annoyed with a fellow in the New York subway who wasn't doing anything with his unruly children. Finally the fellow gets up and goes over to the man – presuming he's the father (he is) – and tells him pretty sternly to get a grip and be a proper parent and supervise his children. The father doesn't really seem to be taking too much notice but apologises for his children's behaviour and almost casually mentions that they're just going home from the hospital where his wife / the children's mother has just died and he's not sure what to do next. Perception is one thing. Not bad in itself but not foolproof. More information – context – and you're better able to understand what's before you and how to respond.

Christians live in time between Jesus' first arrival on Earth for people to see and his return in all glory for people to see. Advent – these four weeks before Christmas give us an orientation at the beginning of the church year – look back and see God in action in Christ – all the plans and activities before Jesus' birth – then the manger in Bethlehem and there's a baby in it – then a cross and an empty tomb and an ascension. Looking back Jesus is now not in sight. Looking forward – well, we can't see him, so we're still waiting – almost 2000 years waiting – and people might be forgiven for wondering 'how long?' but he will return. Ok, how does that big picture help me – how does it help with my exam, pay my bills, sort out relationships, plan for the future, decide whether to do this or that, get married, have children – and all the countless things we need to decide to get on with life now? How does the big picture work? By giving us wide vision, allowing us to zoom out and see today in its context of yesterday and tomorrow or of a week or of a term or of a deployment or of a year or a posting or of a relationship like marriage or family. As I said, wise and mature people will do this anyway but the Christian's vision is wider still – the cross at one end and glory at the other – and so they get to see where and how today fits into that.

That's what Paul did in the last part of his first letter to the Thessalonians – speak from the wide view of life. At first glance it seems Pollyanna-ish – rejoice always?! Some days do not have that written on them. Pray without ceasing?! We've had too many occasions of unanswered prayer on a given day to do that. Give thanks in all circumstances?! Be real! Some days I do bad and some days bad is done to me and neither of them are worth thanksgiving thank you very much. That's one of the problems in talking about Christianity when Christians are accused of being callous, heartless, insensitive – now they may be! – but it is possible that they are speaking wide vision – seeing the big picture – and the listener is only seeing the moment.

Back to Paul and the Thessalonians. He and Silas had only been there a short time – maybe even as little as 4-6 weeks(!) before the persecutions ran them out of town – and the converts and small

congregation were left to fend by themselves. Paul was worried and anxious for them. The big picture vision can easily see the battles with the principalities and powers trying to snuff out faith and congregations, like birds gobbling up the seed on the path or weeds choking or sun drying the life out of the seed. So Paul sends Timothy to find out how they're going – and he's very happy to hear that they're alive – growing even – expanding and doing mission work themselves – but they've got some questions and some problems – mainly to do with the return of Jesus – and so that is why we have the letter called 1st Thessalonians. Paul's rejoicing in their existence and answering their questions and helping them have the wide vision and our second reading is part of his concluding words to them – final exhortations – encouragements – guidance.

Rejoice always?! Yes, because your happiness is not based only on the events of one day – if it is then you will rejoice or not, on and off, and never always. Always means permanence – always (!) and so is grounded not just in a moment but in the permanent truth that Jesus died for me – Jesus rescued me – Jesus rose again so I can be with him – Jesus ascended so he can be with me wherever and whenever I am – so yes, rejoice always.

Because Jesus died and rose again and therefore is the permanent end point that this world might ignore, attack, or follow but can't erase, so he gives us a perspective on life – especially during this waiting time when we don't see him and easily forget him – and default into thinking that each day is up to us. Our behaviour and choices are ours – sure – but life itself, that is a gift given to us by God not so that we might be trapped like rats in a maze but so that we might live with God himself – and he has made that possible.

Paul did tell the Thessalonians to check prophecies – the teachings of Jesus they will hear – to see whether they have the same wide vision. It is not surprising that cults in particular twist the return of Jesus part of the wide vision and church divisions are grounded in different analysis of the time Jesus was on earth – so Thessalonians, check what you hear so that the wide vision stays in proper focus. Same is true today for us!

Don't quench the Holy Spirit – in other words – remain close to the means of the Spirit – those channels the Holy Spirit uses to bring Jesus to us – words, water, bread and wine and if they're not focused on Jesus then make sure they are.

Abstain from every form of evil. Nuff said? Not quite. What is evil? Sure, we can see it large – that's obvious – and no doubt the focus of Paul's thought – watch your behaviour – but it also causes us to pause and consider evil – according to whom? And for Christians, then we're talking about according to Jesus – and this take us into the realm of the first three commandments about God, God's name and worship – and the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer – about God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will. The wide vision will help us also face evil in its many guises that seek to take God and his name and his kingdom and his will from us.

And finally Paul then doesn't say to the Thessalonians 'It's all up to you!'. So much of Christianity says that and it's not true. Our salvation is not up to us. Our sanctification isn't up to us either. It is always God's work at us, on us, and in us. That is what Paul was reminding them when he blessed them in the letter. 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.*

Your salvation doesn't rest on you. That's what the big vision – the wide screen – that has the cross at one end and the second coming at the other tells reminds you – that you are not alone. God – present tense – in the day when you can't see, hear or experience him – is with you and working. His first message to you is 'I love you' – look at the cross. Perfect love – God's love – casts out fear (1 John 4:18) and that brings you peace – no matter what is happening in the day itself – God is working – our response is to live – always keeping that big picture – that hidden perspective in mind – believing it's there and it's true.

Waiting has never been so exciting!