

## Ancient Words for the Modern Crisis

Proverbs 16:31 says, “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.”<sup>1</sup> The point of the proverb is to suggest that with age comes wisdom. This at least should be the case, and the Proverbs reiterates this point in various ways: from encouraging children to listen to their parents, to exhorting us to find wisdom with the aged.

Personally, I’ve found that proverb to be very true in various situations in my own life. As a child, I often asked my parents questions. In college, in early stages of marriage – I went to people who were older than I in order to glean more wisdom. They could speak from their experiences and then also reveal how the Bible applies to everyday life. One of the reason I enjoy reading Christian biographies is to gain wisdom from those who have gone before me.

Now, we all together face another crisis. Circumstances are different. This is the third week that we’re doing a Live Stream for our entire church family. I hope and pray that this does not happen ever again. But we can’t simply wait until this is over. We must ask the Lord, “How are we to live wisely in this time?” This morning, I want to turn to an ancient voice – to a wise Christian who faced hardship and can share wisdom from the Word with us. The man’s name was Chrysostom. He was a pastor in the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, and to this day we have many of his recorded sermons and homilies. He was Christ-loving and God-fearing, and there is a collection of homilies (21 total) that he wrote regarding a very difficult circumstance that his town was facing. While the circumstances are clearly not identical, the principles that he shares can apply directly to us in the midst of COVID concerns.

The title of today’s sermon is “Ancient Words for the Modern Crisis.” I have five points to this sermon. Each point is an encouragement in how to live in this day. Now, I have a confession, the first point, as far as I know, was not shared by Chrysostom in his homilies, but I thought it was necessary to put in. The other four points were highlighted by Chrysostom. I’m going to read quotes by him and then also show how he applied the Word to the difficulties of life. My hope is that this sermon is straightforward and clear. Here’s a wise man who had a righteous life – may we as Christians 1,500 years later listen intently.

Please know, though, that I don’t expect that you’ll walk away applying every point. Maybe you’ll walk away with just one point. But, who knows, maybe God will grace you to grow in all five arenas. All-in-all, I pray that we find comfort and strength in moving forward day-by-day for Christ’s glory.

With this in mind, let’s pray together.

As I said, there are five points. The points can be divided into two sections: Loving God (the first three points) and Loving Others (the last two points). So, we will see that **in the midst of crises, we are to rejoice reasonably, pray purposefully, live gratefully, love wisely and give liberally.**

Before I get into the points, let’s get a brief backdrop into the situation for Chrysostom’s mini-sermons. In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, Emperor Theodosius I laid down some heavy taxes, and there were certain youth in the city of Antioch who were enraged by the taxation. They mobbed their way to through the city to two statues, one of Theodosius and one of Theodosius’ late wife. They toppled the statues and dragged them through the streets in protest.

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Pr 16:31.

Chrysostom refers to these men as blasphemers and “strangers and adventurers, men who act with no deliberate plan, but with every sort of audacity and lawlessness.” Yet, the response of Theodosius was over-the-top. He was so angered by this mob that he vowed to sack the entire city. As a result, the people in the city simply waited for its destruction. Chrysostom wrote, “Lately our city was shaken, but now the very souls of the inhabitants totter! Then the foundations of the houses shook, but now the very foundations of every heart quiver; and we all see death daily before our eyes!” (II.3)

Now, clearly we are not waiting an Emperor to destroy us, but there seems to be a silent destroyer. Many people have fear that something bad may happen to them. Maybe you know people within NYC – like I do – and the difficulties are even greater there. Death toll is on the rise. As God’s children, how are we to live? While Chrysostom’s circumstances were different, the Word never changes. The principles he brings out applies beautifully to our circumstances as well. We should pray purposefully, live gratefully, love wisely and give liberally. These were some of Chrysostom’s points. But before we get into his points, I want to share the *one* point that comes from me. I know I’m not gray-haired, but don’t listen to this first point because it’s me. Listen because it comes from the Word of God.

### 1. Rejoice Reasonably (Jas. 1:2-4, Rom. 12:12, Phil. 4:4-5)

James 1:2-4 says, **“<sup>2</sup>Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”<sup>2</sup>**

When trials of various kinds come into your life, here’s what James says we are to do. We are to count it all joy. I imagine everybody listening to me right now is meeting various kinds of trials right now. Some of you are without work right now. None of us are able to gather together as a church family. You might have other sicknesses in your home. You could be struggling financially, mentally, emotionally. And then you have your own internal temptations. You have various trials.

What does it mean, though, to count it all joy? “Count” is an accounting term. You are to tally things up. You don’t ignore the difficulties and pains. You acknowledge them. You count them up. Then, as you evaluate all the sorrows, you don’t let yourself believe that any of those trials are going to destroy you. You don’t let various trials lead you to despair. Instead, you defy the temptation to despair by choosing joy. Why? Because James says that God is producing greater godliness in you. Producing steadfastness – leading you to completion. The ideas of being perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, actually refers to the idea of wholeness. God’s goal is your wholeness!

While you’re tempted to think that all difficulties and pains are to break you, God’s design is that he will work through these trials to make you whole! Therefore, through faith – by depending on the Lord and believing his promises – you choose joy! This idea is emphasized by the apostle Paul, too. In Romans 12:12, Paul calls the Roman church to rejoice in hope and to be patient in tribulation. Rejoice in *hope*. Even though that church had faced persecution and was going to be facing it, Paul calls them to rejoice in hope! Hope is not just wishful thinking. It’s confident expectation. We know our God. He is worthy to be trusted.

Jesus told us that in this world, there would be tribulation, but then Jesus says, “Take heart!” Why? Because he has overcome the world. How has he overcome the world? Through his life, death,

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jas 1:2–4.

resurrection and ascension. Jesus faced the greatest of all trials in this life. He, being God the Son, endured temptation. He endured rejection. He endured the cross-death. But on that cross, he endured God's eternal, holy, righteous wrath. And on that cross, he satisfied God's justice for humanity's sins. On the cross, he conquered sin. But what about death? He died, but he didn't stay dead. He conquered humanity's great enemy. In conquering sin and death, Jesus then ascended to Heaven and calls all people everywhere to turn from their sinfulness and to turn to him for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Now, those who trust him are promised that God commands all circumstances to serve his good purposes for us. Whether it's persecution or the Corona virus – whatever happens to us will work together for our Christlikeness, our Wholeness!

That's hope! That's assurance. That should cause us to rejoice, right? Therefore, Paul says in Philippians 4:4, **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. . .”**<sup>3</sup> Paul emphasizes the need to rejoice. He states it twice to ensure we get the point. But I'm more intrigued with verse 5. Let your reasonableness be known? What does that mean? If what I said about Jesus living, dying, rising and ascending is true, then what's the reasonable response? Is it to live gripped in fear? Is it to live gripped by despair? What's the worst thing that can happen to us? We die. Yet, to live is Christ and to die is gain. And, I'm not saying that to minimize death. Death is still an enemy. But I'm saying this because Christ has conquered death. And God promises that even if our death is on the near horizon, that works for our wholeness! So, what does it mean to rejoice reasonably? It means to know who our God is, what Jesus has done and is continuing to do. As a result, the reasonable response is rejoicing. A Christian who doesn't rejoice has forgotten their God.

But I want to be careful here. Rejoice doesn't mean to only always have a smile. To count your circumstances as joy can involve lament. There's sorrow over things. There's loss. There's pain. So, take time to *count*. If you don't count, your joy will be shallow. But if you count it all joy, then your lament will lead you to rejoice as well because rejoicing believes the steadfast promises of God.

You could now say, “But I don't feel like rejoicing.” Then my challenge to you is to FIGHT for it. Rejoice anyway. Rejoice, and again I say rejoice, Paul says. Paul goes on to say to think on whatsoever things are true and right and honorable. Fill your mind with reality in Christ and rejoice! Your hope isn't in this life. It's in him! So, in the midst of crises, rejoice reasonably. Now, let's move to Chrysostom's encouragements:

## 2. Pray Purposefully (Phil. 4:6, Rom. 12:12)

In the midst of the trials in Antioch, Chrysostom wrote the following encouragement: **“Let us not despair of our safety, but let us pray, let us make invocation; let us supplicate; let us go on embassy to the King that is above with many tears!” (III.7)** Interestingly, Chrysostom said that this was a time to lament, but he also seems to indicate that while we lament, we do not despair. Our King Jesus reigns! We can go to him with many tears, and we know that he will wipe away our tears someday.

Going back to Philippians 4, after Paul calls us to rejoice, he states in verse 6, **“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”**<sup>4</sup> Rejoice and pray. But you notice I said, “Pray purposefully.” Verse 6 says that we are to let *our* requests be made known. Whatever it is you feel or are burdened by, tell it to the Lord. Times

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<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:4–5.

<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:6.

like these reveal our hearts, and out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. As we pray what's on our heart, God purifies us and even perfects our prayers.

But notice Paul doesn't want our prayers to just be another justification to worry. Why? Because God loves us. We rejoice in the One who is "at hand." He is near and coming again! So, while we rejoice and lament, we don't despair. We fight despair by praying purposefully. We pray our requests and we intermix our prayers with thanksgiving to God – knowing his designs are far superior than anything we could imagine.

So, Ventura, pray purposefully. Have you been prayerless in the midst of this crisis? God is working in these difficulties to call us to prayer! Even thinking of Romans 12:12 again, Paul says, "<sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."<sup>5</sup> Rejoice, Persevere in tribulation and constantly pray!

If you don't know what to pray or how to pray, I'd encourage you to turn to the Lord's prayer and use that as an example prayer. Take each line and then take situations in your life and apply them to the Lord's prayer. "Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be your name." Oh Lord, you are holy and righteous and just and true. Please cause your name to be revered in me! "Your Kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Father, I long for your Kingdom to come. But until that time, I pray that more and more people, including myself, would obey you and honor you on this earth! So many reject you. So many who are experiencing pain and hurt, and they need You. Lord, cause us to turn to you and love you.

Move through the Lord's prayer like this. Or, walk through the lines of a psalm. Whatever you do – pray purposefully! Pray your requests with thanksgiving. And this leads to the next point:

### 3. Live gratefully (1 Thess. 5:18, 2 Cor. 2:14)

Chrysostom stated that in times of difficulty, some people will say that these situations are unworthy of the Providence of God. Obviously, we don't want to blame God for doing anything immoral. However, Chrysostom states that Christians also recognizes that God ordains whatever comes to pass. This doesn't always make sense to us, but we know that he is good. Therefore, Chrysostom goes on to say the following: **"Let us then give thanks to God even for these things, that we have reaped so much fruit from the tribulation; that we have received so great an advantage from the trial. If there were no trial, there would be no crown; if there were no wrestlings, there would be no prize; if there were no lists marked out, there would be no honours; if there were no tribulation, there would be no rest; if there were no winter, there would be no summer...if...we expect the ear of corn to spring and flourish, there must be much rain, much gathering of the clouds, and much frost; and the time of sowing is also a rainy season."** (IV.1)

This is very similar to my point of rejoicing reasonably. But, I want to separate the two. Rejoice is to have joy in God. Gratitude is being thankful for God and being thankful for his blessings. We need to be a people with the eyes to see the spiritual blessings he is at work doing. If you are focused on good gifts merely being a secure bank account or a healthy life, then you will miss the things for which to be grateful. Chrysostom states that God's design in trial is to "burn up our sins" and to make "more illustrious and distinguished" our virtue (IV.4).

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 12:11–12.

This all echoes what the Scriptures say. In the midst of times where people can be tempted to panic, we ought to ask ourselves, “What does God want me to do?” Have you ever asked yourself, “What’s God’s will in this situation?” First Thessalonians 5:18 tells us clearly what God’s will is. I actually want to read verses 16-18 because they state the points of the sermon so far: <sup>16</sup> **Rejoice always,** <sup>17</sup> **pray without ceasing,** <sup>18</sup> **give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.** <sup>6</sup> What’s God’s will? Rejoice, pray and give thanks *in all circumstances*. Paul says this is the will of God in Christ Jesus. Meaning, on the basis of Jesus, live his way. You’re not living on the basis of your circumstances. You’re living on the basis of the One who lived, died and reigns!

This idea is also brought out in 2 Corinthians 2:14. When Paul is talking about the difficulty of gospel ministry, he says, <sup>14</sup> **“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.”**<sup>7</sup> While people reject the message, Paul raises his sights to the glories of Jesus and knows he’s in the triumphal procession of his Savior and King!

Ventura, so are we! As Jesus suffered and rose from the dead; so we will suffer. But through suffering, God has ordained for us to grow. These seasons are strengthening, not crushing. So, look on your circumstances with eyes of faith. Don’t miss what God promises to do in and through you. Without wrestling, there’d be no prize. With no trial, there’s no crown. God wills for crowns and prizes for his children! Live gratefully in this God!

These first three points, highlight loving God. Rejoice, pray and give thanks. All of these practices should be focused on God. If we’re not focused on God in the midst of the trials, we’re at best acting like moral people. But we don’t simply want to be moral. We want to be godly! So, keep these three things in your mind. On the basis of Jesus, love God in the trials. And, on the basis of God in Christ, love others. Now, let’s move to the last two points:

#### **4. Love wisely (1 Tim. 5:23)**

The word “love” is often related to the word “give” in the Bible. Jesus loved us and gave himself. Husbands love as Christ loved and gave. For God so loved that he gave. Love is outward focused. In the midst of crises’ in particular, we can have a hoarding mentality. Just walk through the toilet paper aisles. Christians of all people should not have a hoarding mentality, we should have a giving mentality.

Jesus came and gave of himself and served people. We can say that we love, but love is tested by actions. True Christian love is a love that is based in wisdom. Wisdom is living in light of eternity. The desire is to live with a genuine concern for someone’s *today* in light of *forever*.

Now, I’m giving this backdrop because Chrysostom’s advice is going to seem a little weird. He takes his people in Antioch to 1 Timothy 5:23 where Paul says, <sup>23</sup> **“(No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.)”**<sup>8</sup>

Chrysostom asks why Paul, someone through whom God had performed many miracles, would tell Timothy to use common medical means. Wouldn’t God’s glory be best known through miraculous

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<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Th 5:16–18.

<sup>7</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 2:14.

<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 5:23.

healing? Chrysostom answers, in part, by saying that God often works through ordinary of “weak mean” (I.4).

How does this apply to us? We can often want extraordinary displays of God’s power, but what if God wants us to simply trust him in the midst of ordinary? Honestly, I think it’d be awesome if God guaranteed to keep all of his children healthy as they worship together in one place, but does he promise to do that? No. And one of the concerns is that we may not be loving wisely if we do this.

Think through what it means to love wisely in this season. I had a situation recently with someone who was an unbeliever. God ordained the circumstances, and for some reason I was able to help care for a real and immediate need. What about you? Are you thinking outwardly to the community around you? What about friends and neighbors? How are you loving *wisely*?

So, we are to rejoice reasonably, pray purposefully, live gratefully, love wisely, and finally

### 5. Give Liberally (2 Cor. 8:5, 1 Tim. 6:17)

Again, in the midst of social difficulties, like that in Antioch or even like ours today, money can be something we cling to. We need our stuff. Others can take care of themselves. But Chrysostom takes his stand as he preaches and he reads from 1 Timothy 6:17, which says, **“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”**<sup>9</sup> After reading this passage, Chrysostom goes on to say, **“He hath given thee money, not that thou mayest shut it up for thy destruction, but that thou mayest pour it forth for thy salvation. For this reason also He hath made the possession of riches uncertain and unstable, that by this means he might [relax] the intensity of thy madness concerning it”** (II.20).

Money and stuff is inherently uncertain. We like to think they will give us certainty, but they can’t. In times like these, when the stock market drops and drops and financial projections are all over the place, we should be pointed to the One who possesses all wealth and his glory will never fade! The reality is that physical wealth is fine, but it’s not eternal. Wealth is to serve a greater purpose. And God gives us financial trials to relax the intensity of our insanity of putting our trust in riches! Don’t put your trust in uncertain riches. Put your trust in God and rejoice in the true spiritual riches that he gives to you. His riches are far superior!

This, by the way, is also what Paul emphasizes to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 8. Paul exhorts them to give generously. He talks of a different situation where people in Macedonia gave out of their poverty. Now, it’s the Corinthians opportunity to give generously. He states that God loves a cheerful giver, and in 8:8, **“I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.”**<sup>10</sup> If you love, you will give. Giving will *prove* the genuineness of your love. Now, again, Paul doesn’t simply say “Give,” but he says to give on the basis of Jesus. Paul goes on in verse 9 to say, **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”**<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 6:17.

<sup>10</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 8:8.

<sup>11</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 8:9.

So, why give liberally? Because money isn't our god, people have needs. Jesus became poor to meet our needs and now we have wealth in him! Therefore, we are free to give. So, hear a few more words from Chrysostom once more: **"Wherefore let us not consider riches to be a great good; for the great good is, not to possess money, but to possess the fear of God and all manner of piety" (II.21).**

Ventura, there are many needs in our world, and the needs are only going to be seen more and more as the weeks and months continue on. Budgets are going to be tighter for many people. May we be like the early church in Acts 2 who helped and cared for one another. May we live out the command of Scripture to love wisely and give generously to those around us – pointing to our "Rich" God and Glorious Savior, Jesus!

As I say all of these things, **my genuine prayer is that we as Christians respond in a God-glorifying way in this current crisis. I pray we would, by the grace of Christ, love God and love others. I pray we wouldn't simply "love others" and forget our relationship with God. And I pray we wouldn't "love God," but forget our need to love others. May we hold to both. And in doing so, I pray that we would rejoice reasonably, pray purposefully, live gratefully, love wisely, and give liberally.**

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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