

Thank God No Matter What Happens I Thessalonians 5: 12 – 24

(preached November 19, 2023)

This Thursday we'll celebrate a whole day dedicated to giving thanks. For many of us, Thanksgiving is the holiday we like best. For all of us, it's an important day. Thanksgiving is important because it invites us to pause in our busy lives and give thanks. Thanksgiving is important because we can get so caught up in our own concerns that we forget to be thankful. We need help remembering, remembering to be thankful.

One Sunday School teacher wanted to help his students remember to be thankful. So he asked them to make a list of all the things for which they wanted to thank God. One boy in the class, as he made his list, put something unusual at the very top: his glasses! The teacher was surprised that the boy had put his glasses at the top of his list, but he was also impressed. He thought to himself, some young people resent having to wear glasses. But here, obviously, was a young man mature enough to appreciate what his glasses did for him.

"Johnny," he said, "I see that you put your glasses at the top of the list of things you're thankful for. Is there any special reason?"

Johnny answered, "Yes, there is. My glasses keep the boys from hitting me and they keep the girls from kissing me."

This Thursday, you and I will have an opportunity to express our thankfulness. With turkey and cranberry sauce, with mashed potatoes and gravy and pumpkin pie, with braised brussels sprouts and other vegetable delights, we'll gather with family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving. We'll pause and remember all the things we're thankful for. Thanksgiving brings us together with people we love. It brings us together as a country. Because the United States is made up of people from many different backgrounds, Thanksgiving is the one holiday we have in common. So, along with giving thanks for many other things, we can give thanks for this holiday we share.

So what are you thankful for this year? As you sit down to dinner, will you be thanking God for the good food on your table? As you put your napkin on your lap, will you be saying thank you for the good health of your family and the summer vacation you all enjoyed?

When I celebrate Thanksgiving this year, I'll be thanking God for the usual things: the rich and delicious food we share at this special meal, the health of my family, and my own health. I'll also be thanking God for this church and the welcome you've given me as your Bridge Pastor. I'll be thankful for the way I've felt God's presence in our life together. I'll be thanking God for all the good things I enjoy.

It's good to be thankful. It's good for our overall happiness. Scientists tell us that people who choose to be grateful actually experience changes in the brain. That's

according to an article called “Choose to Be Grateful,” by social scientist Arthur Brooks. Brooks says that those changes in the brain actually make them happier in the long run. Research published in the journal *Cerebral Cortex* shows that gratitude stimulates the hypothalamus, which is a part of the brain that regulates stress. Gratitude actually reduces stress (Brooks, *New York Times*, 11.21.15).

It’s good for us to be grateful. It’s good to say prayers of thanksgiving. In our prayers, we generally thank God for the good things that happen. Since God created the world and pronounced it good, I don’t think God minds when our prayers of thanksgiving are full of the good things in our lives. But if you take a closer look at the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica, you’ll find something that may surprise you. At the close of the letter, Paul writes, “Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; *thank God no matter what happens*. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.”

“Thank God no matter what happens.” Does that sound a little strange? Would we rather Paul said, “Thank God when good things happen?” A lot of us do thank God when good things happen. But I think that here, Paul is saying that if we only give thanks to God for the good things, we’re missing out. If we only give thanks to God for the good things, we’re missing something very important about gratitude.

Paul says, thank God no matter what happens. Don’t just thank God for the good things that happen. Thank God no matter what happens, and let gratitude open your eyes. This is what God wants for you. Gratitude isn’t just for the good times. It’s for the times that try our souls.

During the 1980s, there was a war in the Middle East between the countries Iraq and Iran. At that time a Presbyterian minister named Benjamin Weir was serving as a missionary in Lebanon. During that war he was kidnapped by Shiite militants. He was held hostage for sixteen months. The conditions of his captivity were miserable. When Weir was released, he was interviewed by reporters. They asked him how he dealt with boredom and despair. They asked him how he spent his time. His answer stunned them. He said, “[I spent my time] counting my blessings.”

“Blessings?” they responded.

“Yes,” Weir explained. “Counting my blessings. Some days I got to take a shower. Sometimes there were some vegetables in my food. And I could always be thankful for the love of my family.”

Weir got through his ordeal with the practice of gratitude. Gratitude was an exercise that opened his eyes to the little things that made life bearable, and helped him remember the love of his family.

In her book, *Attitudes of Gratitude*, M.J. Ryan offers a striking image for gratitude. She writes:

“Gratitude is like a flashlight. (*repeat*) If you go out in your yard at night and turn on a flashlight, you suddenly can see what’s there. It was always there, but you couldn’t see it in the dark. Gratitude lights up what is already there. You don’t necessarily have anything more or anything different, but suddenly you can actually see what is. You’re just standing in your yard, but suddenly you realize: Oh, there’s a blossom in your garden, pushing up through the leaves; or, Oh, there’s the measuring cup you’ve been looking for that your daughter was using to make mud pies. It’s just your ordinary back yard, but suddenly you are filled with happiness, thankfulness, and joy.”

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In *Attitudes of Gratitude*, M.J. Ryan goes on to write about her father’s practice of gratitude in the face of great difficulty. Late in his life, her father was seriously ill. She writes, “I went to see my father in the hospital about a week before he died. He had suffered for years with emphysema. He was hooked up to an oxygen tank, barely able to move around, and was failing fast. He was bedridden. [He was] on constant oxygen and medication. [He was over six feet tall, but he] weighed only 130 pounds because it was difficult to eat anything but ice cream. Every breath was a labored struggle. I asked him whether the quality of his life was worth all the effort.

“He responded, ‘I still enjoy being alive. Sometimes it’s easier to breathe and then I really enjoy just quietly taking a breath. I still enjoy reading the comics in the newspaper and watching the ball games on TV. My life is good.’”

Ryan writes, “he said not a word about all that he had lost, all that he would never be able to do again.”

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This is God’s desire for us: that we give thanks no matter what. God wants us to give thanks - not just when good things happen, but whatever happens. So thank God for all the good things. But thank God also for the times that try your soul. When you do that, when you give thanks no matter what, gratitude will open your eyes. Gratitude will open your eyes to what’s already there, what you had missed. You begin to see all of life as a gift. You begin to see the things that happen, all the things that happen, as openings for God to work in your life.

So give thanks for the things that may not look like blessings. Give thanks when a door closes. Give thanks when it feels like you’re at the end of your rope. Ask God to help you see what’s out there. Ask God to help you see what’s out there that you hadn’t noticed before. You’ll be amazed at the change it can make. It can open your eyes to wonderful possibilities.

In closing, I'd like to offer an illustration that may sound familiar from last week's church email. I think it bears repeating:

Presbyterian preacher and Bible scholar Tom Long writes about the way we Christians respond to the difficulties of life as we get older. He says, "It has been my observation that somewhere deep in the forest of life many Christians come to a fork in the path. Some head in one direction, traveling their last few days in bitterness, shouting at the world for its iniquity, wagging their heads over the sad plight of our time, cursing 'what this world has come to nowadays.' Others, however, are given the gift of traveling the other way, the path of a cheerful confidence in providence...This is the path that knows that a banquet table awaits at the end and that a house of music and dancing can already be heard in the distance. This is the path that sees a world full of miracles. This is the way of blessing, the path of gratitude."

When you come to that fork in the forest of life, may your eyes be open to a world full of miracles. May your ears pick up, ever so faintly, that distant music, and may your feet join the steps of that joyful dance. May you remember Paul's words, "Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Rev. Elva Merry
Pentecost 25