

Give Thanks In All Circumstances
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
Key Verse: 5:18

“...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Happy Thanksgiving! What a privilege we have to celebrate Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving was first declared a national holiday by President George Washington in 1789. He especially thanked God for helping the new American nation forge a proper constitution. During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a federal holiday. He called on America to thank God for guiding us in that painful time. Since then Thanksgiving has been celebrated annually in the USA as an official holiday. This Thursday, November 23, is Thanksgiving Day.

Among all of the holidays, Thanksgiving is uniquely American. Traditionally, the first Thanksgiving was celebrated by the Pilgrims in 1621. They thanked God for helping them pioneer this land, overcoming difficulties. They declared a day of thanksgiving and offered prayer to God. Afterward, they ate a delicious dinner with Indian neighbors. Many Americans still celebrate Thanksgiving day like that. According to a 1998 Gallup poll, 64% of Americans offer prayers of thanks to God before eating Thanksgiving dinner. In many cases, people share thanksgiving topics one by one around the table, then eat turkey. Many of us will do the same this week. Before we do so, let’s study what the Bible teaches about giving thanks to God based on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. It says, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Paul wrote these words to a church of young Christians in Thessalonica. One of his main concerns in his letter was that the young Christians did not understand the meaning of Jesus’ Second Coming. Some thought those who passed away before Jesus came again were lost. They were weeping bitterly over deceased family members and friends. They were acting like people in the world who have no hope (4:13). Paul wrote to them, “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him” (4:14). What good news! Jesus would come again in power and glory, and their dear family members who died in the Lord would be with him. They had no reason to weep bitterly. They could live with great hope in Jesus. Others believed that since Jesus was coming again they did not need to work or go to school. They became very lazy and spent their time in idle chatter. Paul taught them to be alert and to encourage one another and to work hard as they waited for Jesus to come. As part of his teaching, Paul said, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” These are wonderful words. Many people choose them as key verses. But in reality, it is not easy at all to practice them. Let’s think about them one by one.

I. Be joyful always (16).

Verse 16 says, “Be joyful always.” Somehow, these positive and wonderful words challenge us greatly. The world is full of sad and tragic and depressing things. It is not easy to be joyful even part of the time living in this world. But these words say, “Be joyful always.” Let’s try to understand what kind of joy Paul is talking about and how we can obtain it.

We can say that there are two kinds of joy: spiritual joy and worldly joy. Worldly joy has many varieties. Some book titles explain this: “The Joy of Cooking,” and “The Joy of the Game.” Many U. of Illinois football fans experienced the joy of victory over #1 ranked Ohio State last week. But this joy is temporal because it comes from the world. These are rather benign worldly joys. There are also malignant worldly joys--the pleasures of sin--which bear the fruit of destruction and death, such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual immorality, and gambling. People seek some kind of joy, though it also brings sorrow. It is because men need joy. Without joy, no one can live happily in this world. We need spiritual joy.

When God made man he put him in the Garden of Eden. “Eden” literally means “joy” or “delight.” In Eden there was no death or disease. There was no sin, no hatred, no envy, no greed. All that people had to do was to love God, love one another and work hard in their God-given mission. Joy followed them like a shadow. They were joyful always. But at Satan’s enticement people were caught in their own pride and doubt and fell into sin. Sin broke their love relationship with God. They were banished from the Garden of Eden. The result was unending sorrow, distress, fear and worry. There was no more joy. They had to face a death sentence. And after the first death there would be a

second death, eternal punishment in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This harsh spiritual reality makes man's life like that of a prisoner on death row.

God saw mankind in his misery and helplessness. God decided to extend his mercy and saving grace. God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to save us from sin and eternal destruction. At the birth of Christ, angels appeared to shepherds living out in the fields and said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10,11). We can be truly joyful because God has solved our problem of sin and death by sending a Savior, Jesus Christ. We can have true and everlasting spiritual joy, joy that comes from God. Psalm 16:11 says, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal joy at your right hand."

We can have true joy in God. This joy comes when we repent of our sins and accept the forgiveness of God through the blood of Jesus. Once King David lost his joy because of sin. He repented with tears, saying, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Ps 51:12). Then God forgave him and joy came. St. Paul teaches us how to be joyful always. He wrote in Philippians 4:4-7, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." At that time, Paul was in a Roman prison. He was old. It was natural for him to look at the dark prison walls and become gloomy. But instead he looked at Jesus and began to pray. Then he could know the will of God for him. He could thank God. He could experience the peace of God. He could rejoice truly, even in Roman prison. When we have Jesus in our hearts we can be joyful always.

II. Pray continually (17).

Verse 17 says, "Pray continually." What is prayer? Usually people think that prayer is talking to God. Many people seem to pray a lot because they talk to God a lot. They bring all kinds of problems and requests to God, pressing God to do what they want. They seem to demand God to do their will. Such people may utter the words of the Lord's prayer innumerable times. They may speak in tongues to God. But one thing is lacking in their prayer. They do not listen to God. Prayer involves listening to God. When we listen to someone we can find out what they are thinking and what they want and need. We can know their problems and desires. In the same way, we can know what God wants when we listen to God. We must listen to God to find out what he wants us to do.

Jesus taught us what to pray in the Lord's prayer. First, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Our burning desire in prayer must be for God's name to be honored. Second, "Your kingdom come, your will be done." We must pray for God's divine rule to come. We must pray that God may rule our hearts, our families, our fellowships, our nation, our world. Through our prayer, God drives out Satan and reclaims what is rightly his. God wants to rule as King. Third, "Give us this day our daily bread." Notice that we do not pray for "my" daily bread, but for "our" daily bread. We must pray for others, that God may feed them. Our prayer must include concern for our dear brothers and sisters in our Father God. Fourth, "forgive our sins as we forgive others." We need forgiveness each day. And we must forgive others on a daily basis as well. Fifth, "Lead us not into temptation." We must ask God's protection and guidance daily so that we may not fall into the devil's trap.

When we pray with these prayer topics, according to God's will, we can be sure that God will answer. 1 John 5:14,15 say, "This is the confidence that we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." So Jesus urges us, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you" (Mt 7:7). We must pray for God's blessing on the 2008 Purdue International Summer Bible Conference. We must pray for North America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We must pray for the Christmas Worship Service 2007, especially for the Christmas message. We must pray for Missionary John Lee to recover from sickness and for many other international affairs.

Verse 17 says that we must "pray continually." "Continually" is different than "continuously." "Continuously" means without ceasing, like running water. But continually means constantly, again and again, without giving up. In Luke 18:1 Jesus told his disciples that they should always pray and not give up. We must pray persistently. If we pray sporadically or from time to time, we will be vulnerable to Satan's attack. Satan knows our weak points well. If we relax in our prayer life, Satan will attack immediately. When we become tired and run down, and forget to wear

our cap or jacket, then the cold virus attacks us. In the same way, if we are lazy in prayer, Satan attacks our weak point. Those who fall to Satan become crazy. This can happen to anyone who does not pray according to God's will. When we pray continually God gives us the Holy Spirit. We can bear the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy and peace. But when we do not pray we can become the victim of Satan's schemes. So we must pray continually.

III. Give thanks in all circumstances (18).

Finally, Paul said, "...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." To give thanks to God is our basic attitude toward God. No matter what circumstance we are in, we must give thanks to God. God is our Creator and we are his creatures. God provides everything we need such as the air we breathe, water, food, family, friends, meaningful work, culture and art, and all good things. We must thank God for the beautiful sunsets, the majestic mountains, and all the miracles of nature. These days we see the falling leaves: bright yellow, orange, red, even purple. They are so beautiful. If we are poetic, we can write beautiful poems about the falling leaves. But some people are only burdened by them and complain that they will have to rake them up soon. America is a most blessed nation with good air, good water, good soil, good systems and so on. So we must thank God that we live in America. Chicago is the Windy City. The strong winds blow all of the dirty air away so that we can enjoy fresh and clean air, unlike New York or Los Angeles. So we must thank God that we live in Chicago.

Above all, we must thank God who solved our problem of sin and death through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. God loves us so much that he is ready to give all the best things to us. So we don't need to complain about anything. We only need to thank God for everything.

However, some people do not thank God in spite of all his goodness and grace. Instead they find reasons to complain. Romans 1:21 says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." People become very sick in mind and heart when they complain. An unthankful mind is like an infectious disease that eats away all the good things in a person until they are decrepit and miserable. When we complain, Satan begins to work. But when we thank God, the Holy Spirit works and many good things happen.

After World War II, Japanese Naval Officer Kawakami Keiichi returned to his homeland. But the realities of Japan's poverty were staggering to see. He complained every day about the times, and about Japan's leadership, and lived out his days grumbling and discontent. After a while, his body grew stiff like a rock and he couldn't move. No medicine helped him. Then a Christian doctor gave him this prescription, "Say 'Thank you' ten thousand times per day. A thankful heart will heal your disease." Desperate, and ready to do anything for a cure, he muttered, "Thank you," on his sickbed every day. As he said it, and without knowing it, he actually started to find thanks inside, even for the mundane things around him. One day his son gave him two persimmons. As he put out his hand, Mr. Keiichi said, "Thank you." From that day forward, his frozen body loosened and his disease was gone. Grumbling and complaining, and grudges and curses are the root of disease. But thanksgiving is the wonderdrug that heals every disease. Grumbling breeds discontent but thanksgiving brings forth happiness. If we can give thanks we become happy.

Reading Hellen Keller's essay, '3 Days to See', gives us an idea of just how many things we have to be thankful for.

'If, by some miracle, I were granted three seeing days, to be followed by a relapse into darkness, I should divide the period into three parts...First I should like to gaze long upon the face of my dear teacher, Mrs. Ann Sullivan Macy, who came to me when I was a child and opened the outer world to me...The next day - the second day of sight - I should arise with the dawn and see the thrilling miracle by which night is transformed into day...

The following morning, I should again greet the dawn, anxious to discover new delights, for I am sure that, for those who have eyes which really see, the dawn of each day must be a perpetually new revelation of beauty...Now I begin my rounds of the city. First, I stand at a busy corner, merely looking at people, trying by sight of them to understand something of their lives. I see smiles, and I am happy. I see serious determination, and I am proud. I see suffering, and I am compassionate. On the evening of the third day, I would want to come home and pray and thank God who opened my eyes for three days to see.

Helen Keller wished for ordinary things that we take for granted. If we think for a minute, we realize there are so many small graces we receive from God which we should be thankful for.

Verse 18 says, "...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." We must give thanks to God in all circumstances. When we do so, God blesses us. Daniel was trapped by his enemies and about to be thrown into the lion's den. He faced certain death. Yet he kept on praying and gave thanks to God. He trusted God, the Sovereign Ruler of all things. God was pleased and shut the lion's mouths and delivered him from harm. St. Paul was in a prison cell after being unjustly arrested. He was bleeding from the wounds of flogging. At that time he sang a hymn to God. He thanked God even in that situation. Then God intervened delivered him through a miracle.

Giving thanks to God does not depend on our circumstances. It is an attitude of heart. Let's decide to give thanks to God. Thanksgiving is the key to the door of blessing and happiness. Happiness enters through thanksgiving's door and leaves through the back door of complaints. Let's give thanks to God in all circumstances. This is God's will for us in Christ Jesus.