

Unceasing Thanksgiving

On this Thanksgiving week, are you thankful?

Most of us are thankful for the good things (as we measure them). Think of all many of us have to be thankful for today-- like a safe and comfortable home, a secure and providing job, an insured savings account and an assured retirement plan, a healthy and mobile body, an active and full life, and so on.

But are we really thankful? The test is our text this morning—1st Thessalonians 5.18. Listen to these words:

1 Thessalonians 5:18 *in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Now let's go over that list of our usual sources for thanksgiving in life in America this month. Most of us are thankful for the good things (as we measure them)—but what if things are “not so good” according to our way of looking at life? Take for instance:

- ***A safe and comfortable home***—what if we had to live in the bad part of town, in an apartment or house that was dirty, unsafe, and cold? Would you still be thankful? That is where ***most*** Christians in the world today do live!
- ***A secure and providing job***—what if you were unemployed, underemployed, or disabled and never able to work again? Would you still be thankful? That is where ***many*** Christians in the world are today! Remember 2/3rds of the world lives on less than a dollar per day.
- ***An insured savings account and an assured retirement plan***—what if you were penniless, uninsured, and with no social, financial, or medical safety net? Would we still be thankful? That is where ***most*** Christians in the world are today!
- ***A healthy, strong, and mobile body***—what if you were weak, sick, infirm, and without a prognosis of return to full health? Would we still be thankful? That is where ***many*** Christians in the world are today!
- ***An active and full life***—what if you were far from leisure and recreation, distant to action and excitement, shut in, immobile, without a car, a family, a circle of

close friends, and money to get any of the above? Would we still be thankful? That is where **a lot of** Christians in the world are today!

- **A wonderful family and friends**—what if you were the only believer in your family, or even in your city somewhere in the Middle East? Would we still be thankful? That is where **a lot of** Christians in the world are today!

So are we really thankful? Or are we only thankful for what we consider to be the good times? The way to measure genuine gratitude is to see if this verse fits us. "***In everything***" do we give thanks?

Paul was one of the most thankful men in the 1st Century. Yet that was in spite of his circumstances. **Paul did not have a safe and comfortable home**—unless you count the local jail as safe, though uncomfortable. **He did not have a secure and providing job**—he was dependent upon the gifts of God's people for much of his ministry life. **He did not have an insured savings account and an assured retirement plan**—unless you count treasures laid up in Heaven, and Christ's promise to never leave or forsake. **He did not have a healthy, strong, and mobile body**—unless you count the one he was getting when he finally got home to Glory and saw Jesus face to face. **He did not have an active and full life**—unless you count ministry as active and struggles as full.

But he was thankful in everything. Remember Paul's testimony in **2nd Corinthians 4.7-18**

Paul said all that is valuable to me is attached to God. My treasure is from Him and I am just an expendable vessel. **4:7 this treasure is in earthen vessels.** The Gr. word means "baked clay," and refers to clay pots. Paul said I am cheap, breakable, and replaceable. But like a container that serves necessary household functions—God has me on earth to serve Him. The picture Paul uses is vivid. That Greek word for "earthen" is *kinosotra*—exactly what archaeologists call the objects they are digging up today. In the time of Paul these vessels were rarely used as vaults to store valuables, such as money, jewelry, or important documents. Rather, they were almost exclusively used for holding garbage and waste. That common usage is exactly the use Paul had in mind. This is how Paul viewed himself—for God's sake he chose to live like Christ taught. Paul was lowly, common, expendable, and replaceable—so God would get all the credit, and all the glory (cf. Matthew 11:28-30; 1 Cor. 1:20–27; 2 Tim. 2:20, 21). When God uses us, frail and expendable as we are, it is to declare that salvation and ministry are of the Lord and not of us (Jonah 2:9). Always remember that our limitations are not a hindrance to serving the Lord, they are essential to proper ministry.

It is not new for God to use the picture of a cracked and broken vessel for His Glory. Do you remember the lesson the Lord used in the life of Gideon in Judges 7? God instructed Gideon to only use three hundred men to rid the Land of countless Midianite invaders. The plan was simple, one trumpet and torch and one earthen vessel per person. The torches were hidden in the clay jars so that the light couldn't be visible at a distance. After the tens of thousands of armed Midianite soldiers were surrounded by these 300 men—the clay pots were smashed. Then the light that brought the Lord's victory began to shine forth. In many of our lives we spend all of our time trying to keep

our life, our health, our strength, our security—all intact. It may be the only way the Lord can shine out of us is to let something in our neat little world to get smashed, broken, and ruined. Then when He wins a mighty victory just like with Gideon, God gets all the credit. Are you willing to see yourself like Paul did—a jar of clay, an expendable, fragile, replaceable, lowly tool? If so, God will let His treasure spill forth from your life.

Always remember who designed your body with all its imperfections. God made us just like we are so we can accomplish what He wants us to do. We should never complain about our limitations, weaknesses, handicaps, lack of gifts or abilities--because Psalm 139:13–16 indicates that right down to our very genetic code, God designed us. God makes us *earthen* vessels so that we need His power. Paul says, 'I focus on the treasure and not on the vessel'. *God tells Paul, and thus each of us today—I AM glorified through weak vessels.* To quote one of the greatest missionaries of all time, who opened the vast interior of 19th century China to the Gospel, J. Hudson Taylor, "All God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on Him being with them."

So what kept Paul going? He had the treasure, He had Christ. The more his clay pot got worn out, cracked, and broken—the more the treasure was revealed. Just like the scene from a hundred years ago captured by an old hymn says—Paul had Christ, what else could he want. In the 19th century, a city missionary in London was called to an old tenement building where a woman lay dying in the last stages of a terrible disease. The room was cold and she had nowhere to lie but on the floor. When the missionary asked if there was anything he could do, she replied, "I have all I really need; I have Jesus Christ." Deeply moved¹, Letha H. Sims went home and penned these words:

In the heart of London City,
Mid the dwellings of the poor,
These bright and golden words were uttered,
"I have Christ. What want I more?"
Spoken by a lonely woman dying on a garret floor,
Having not one earthly comfort,
"I have Christ. What want I more?"

- **Pruning Cultivates Christlikeness:** 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body."*
- **Pruning brings Christ's Rewards:** 2 Corinthians 4:17 *"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."*

Now listen to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12.5-10. Stand, read, pray.

¹ Adapted from MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians*, (Chicago: Moody Press), 1983, page 269.

So no matter how difficult life may be, we have hope to go on. We have a reason to be thankful—we have the treasure, we have Christ, and that is everything! God wants to **capture us** by His love, **harness us** by His Spirit, **shape us** by His Word, and **change us** into usefulness by His PRUNING! That is what our lifetime is all about. The shaping, refining, pruning Hand of God is with us all through life—either we accept it and grow, or resent it and miss the eternal blessings.

1. **Pruning Strengthens Our Life:** 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 *“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan **to buffet me**, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for **My strength is made perfect in weakness.**” Therefore most gladly I will rather **boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.** Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. **For when I am weak, then I am strong.**”*
2. **Pruning Helps us to Witness:** Philippians 1:12-13 But I want you to know, brethren, that the **things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel**, 13 so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ;
3. **Pruning Magnifies God:** Philippians 1:19-20 *“For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, 20 according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also **Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.**”*
4. **Pruning Opens our Life to be a Model for Others:** 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 And you became followers of us and of the Lord, **having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit**, 7 so that **you became examples** to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.
5. **Pruning Assures us that we are Really Saved:** Hebrews 12:5-6 *“And you have forgotten the exhortation which **speaks to you as to sons:** ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And **scourges every son** whom He receives.’”*
6. **Pruning Promotes Righteous Living:** Hebrews 12:11 *“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it **yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness** to those who have been trained by it.”*
7. **Pruning Grows our Patience:** James 1:3-4 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.
8. **Pruning Purifies our Life:** 1 Peter 1:7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” *“The cleaner we are in our daily lives, the more fruit we will bear. The leaner we are the more capacity we have to glorify God (First Corinthians 10.31). Note that the **fruitful** branches are “purged” (v. 2—same word as “clean” in v. 3) so that they will bear more fruit. God cleanses us through the Word, chastening us to make us more fruitful, which helps to explain why a dedicated Christian often has to go through suffering. As believers move from producing “fruit” to “more fruit” (v. 2) to “much fruit” (v. 8), they glorify*

the Father. The evidences of the "abiding life" are: a sense of the Savior's love (v. 9), obedience to His Word (v. 10), answered prayer (v. 7), and joy (v. 11)."²

9. **Pruning Leads to Maturity:** 1 Peter 5:10 *But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, **after you have suffered a while**, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.* Peter says endure the suffering such a life brings! WHY? Because: 1. SUFFERING IS BY SOVEREIGN DESIGN. Peter speaks of the law of Christian suffering when he notes "after" we go through suffering, God will restore, establish, strengthen and settle him. Each of these words Peter uses is a vivid picture. Each explains what God wants to do in us. 2. SUFFERING SUPPLIES SPIRITUAL POWER. Through suffering God will RESTORE a man. The word for restore is difficult in this case to translate. It is *kartarizein*, the word commonly used for setting a fracture, the word used in Mark 1:19 for mending nets. It means "**to supply that which is missing**". Trials taken from the Hand of God actually the way He supplies those things we need to accomplish all He has designed for us to do and be. 3. SUFFERING SOLIDIFIES OUR DAILY LIVING. Through suffering God will ESTABLISH a man. The word is *sterixein*, which means "**to make as solid as granite**." Suffering of body and sorrow of heart do one of two things to a man. They either make him collapse or they leave him with a solidity of character which he could never have gained anywhere else. If he meets them with continuing trust in Christ, he emerges like toughened steel that has been tempered in the fire. 4. SUFFERING STRENGTHENS OUR ENDURANCE. Through suffering God will STRENGTHEN a man. The Greek is *sthenoun*, which means "**to fill with strength**." Here is the same sense again. A life with no effort and no discipline almost inevitably becomes a flabby life. 5. SUFFERING SETTLES US IN CHRIST. Through suffering God will SETTLE a man. The Greek is *themelioun*, which means "**to lay the foundations**." When we have to meet sorrow and suffering we are driven down to the very bedrock of faith. It is then that we discover what are the things which cannot be shaken. It is in time of trial that we discover the great truths on which real life is founded. 6. SUFFERING SHOWS WHAT WE ARE. "Suffering is very far from doing these precious things for every man. It may well drive a man to bitterness and despair; and may well take away such faith as he has. But if it is accepted in the trusting certainty that a father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear, then out of suffering come things which the easy way may never bring."³

Now look at #556

Martin Rinkart was a pastor at Eilenberg, Saxony during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Because Eilenberg was a walled city, it became a severely overcrowded refuge for political and military fugitives from far and near. As a result, the entire city suffered from famine and disease. In 1637 a great pestilence swept through the area, resulting in the death of some eight thousand persons, including Rinkart's wife. At that time he was 41, widowed and the only minister in Eilenberg because the others had either died or fled. Rinkart alone conducted the burial services for 4480 people, sometimes as many as 40 or 50 a day!

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books) 1992.

³ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: 1 Peter*, in loc.

We may well ask why all this dramatic experience and difficulty is not reflected in Rinkart's hymn. Had the good pastor seen so much stark tragedy that he had become insensitive to human needs and problems? Of course not. He simply had come to believe that God's providence is always good, no matter how much we are tempted to doubt it. Just be thankful in everything as Paul said.

- Thanksgiving expresses our humility: The only person who can genuinely give thanks for all things is the humble person, the person who knows he deserves nothing and who therefore gives thanks even for the smallest things. Lack of thankfulness comes from pride, from the conviction that we deserve something better than we have. Pride tries to convince us that our job, our health, our spouse, and most of what we have is not as good as we deserve.
- A mark of the unsaved person is thanklessness to God (Rom. 1:21), but a mark of the Spirit-filled believer is always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father. He is "anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving [lets his] requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). He is "overflowing with gratitude" (Col. 2:7) and he continually offers "up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name" (Heb. 13:15).

In the unclear world of tomorrow, it is entirely possible that we may experience great difficulty, persecution, and even war and death. Christians should prepare themselves and their families for this possibility, so that if and when it comes, we might face it in spiritual victory, giving testimony that ours is a faith that works. It may help us to know Martin Rinkart's experience and his hymn, which confirms these words of the Apostle Paul in one of the often-quoted Bible verses is Romans 8.28 (*Living Letters*): "And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God, and if we are fitting into His plans." Do we really believe this assurance? If so then we can sing like that pastor of long ago, "Now thank we all our God".

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His world rejoices;
Who, from our mother's arms,
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace,
And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills
In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given,
The Son, and Him who reigns
With them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God,
Whom earth and heaven adore;
For thus it was, is now,
And shall be evermore.

Martin Rinkart (1586-1649)

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

- ✓ If you are a man who has a family you need to plan to bring your Bible and plan a brief scripture and prayer at your Thursday meal.
- ✓ If you do not have a godly husband (or even any husband) take the lead and read God's Word at the Thanksgiving Meal.
- ✓ If you don't know where to start ask any elder or any deacon in this church today what they read at Thanksgiving and try to pattern yours after theirs. The key is to pause and let God into your meal!
- ✓ And one more thing, once you get started, why not just try and do something from the Word of God each day with your family!

APPENDIX

Back to 2 Corinthians 4.7-18 for a moment.

1. **We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed [2 Cor. 4:8a]**. Paul says he is **Hard pressed ... but not crushed. We are sore pressed at every point but not hemmed in**. In Christ there is always hope, room to grow, strength to go on, and an opportunity to serve. So no matter how much pressure Paul felt he never gave up.
2. **We are perplexed, but not in despair [2 Cor. 4:8b]**. “We are perplexed”—he couldn’t see any way out—“but not in despair.” Paul did get out—the Lord always at the right time showed him a way. The root of the Greek word translated **perplexed** means, “to be at a loss as to what to say or do”; the intensive used here means to be absolutely shut up so as to have no way or means available.⁴ **We are persecuted by people but never abandoned by God**. From the record of the church past we find that in the direst of times martyrs and persecuted saints always found their sweetest times of fellowship with the Lord.
3. **Persecuted, but not forsaken [2 Cor. 4:9a]**. Paul wrote once from prison these words that express this hope “But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel; So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places” (Phil. 1:12–13). Even when he was in prison he could always say that the Lord had never deserted Him but was always close and felt. So Paul says he was **Persecuted, but not abandoned**. Or to put it another way **We are at our mind’s end but never at our hope’s end**. In all things we triumph by hope.
4. **Cast down, but not destroyed [2 Cor. 4:9b]**. “Even at the end of his life Paul could say, “... I have *finished* my course ...” (2 Tim. 4:7, italics mine). Paul seems to be fighting a losing battle. Can’t you sense that this man is very weak? And yet, in his weakness, he is *strong*. If we could have seen this little crippled, weak, sick Jew up against the mighty juggernaut of Roman power, we would have concluded that he was *nothing*. But, my friend, the fact is he brought a message that *withered* the Roman Empire. Paul seemed to be so weak, and yet God delivered him again and again. He used miraculous means and He also used natural means. God will never forsake His servants”.⁵ Paul says **We are knocked down but not knocked out**. “The supreme characteristic of the Christian is not that he does not fall, but that every time he falls he rises again. It is not that he is never beaten, but he is never ultimately defeated.”⁶

Giving thanks is eukharisteo 39x in the New Testament

- It is Christ's word for communion in:

Matthew 26:27 *Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you.*

Mark 14:23 *Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it.*

⁴ Hodge, Charles, *2 Corinthians: The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books) 1997.

⁵ McGee, J. Vernon, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 2000, c1981.

⁶ Barclay, William, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Corinthians (Revised Edition)*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1975.

Luke 22:17, 19 *Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; 19 And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."*

- It is Paul's word for his chosen lifestyle in:
1 Thessalonians 5:18 *in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*
- And it is what we shall be doing forever in:
Revelation 11:17 *saying: "We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, Because You have taken Your great power and reigned.*

Infirmities or weakness is when we have no strength to go on, to accomplish, to complete. We are unable, feel useless and helpless—that is when He wants to use us!

When we are without strength *asthenia* (a = without or not + *sthenoo* = strong or strength)

Romans 8:26 *Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.*

1 Corinthians 2:3 *I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.*

1 Corinthians 15:43 *It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.*

2 Corinthians 11:30 *If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.*

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 *Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. 7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Hebrews 5:2 *He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness.*