

## Ceaseless Gratitude

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 30, 2020

### Introduction

- ❖ First off, I want to welcome all of you who are new to our church. Especially you students who are starting your college career in the midst of a pandemic. Normally, this would be the time to visit new churches and meet new people, but sadly we can't be together in person. I'm grateful you were somehow connected to us, and I pray for the chance to meet you soon.
  - I also want to say welcome back to those returning to school and rejoining us virtually. I'm sure you're as disappointed as we are that we're still in the same situation as last semester. It's been tough on us all being separated for so long.
    - **We're thankful that at least we still have home worship. I know it doesn't compare to corporate worship as the assembled church.** It's an inadequate alternative, and we're praying for the day we can safely regather. But we're thankful for home worship nonetheless.
  
- ❖ We finished a summer series through James, and we'll be starting a new one next week through Micah. **For those who are new, one thing we love to do at HCC is to preach straight through books of the Bible.** Letting God set the agenda in our pulpit. We go back and forth between the Old and New Testament, exposing you to the whole counsel of God.
  - But this morning, to tie us through between series, I'm going to do something different. **I'm going to preach on just a single verse of Scripture.** Of course, it'll be set within its biblical context, but we're going to focus on a verse that speaks directly to the challenges we're facing, as this pandemic prolongs with no clear end in sight.
    - **And as we're dealing with a nationwide health crisis, we're also experiencing tension and strife over issues of race and politics.** There's so much division and disagreement, even between Christians. With the upcoming election, it feels like everything is on the line. After two straight weeks of party conventions, the one thing both parties seem to agree on is that it'll be the end of all things good and decent if the other side wins in November.
  
- ❖ **The future looks bleak no matter which way you cut it. So I'm not surprised if you're feeling anxious.** Because on top of all that, you have the added burden of your own struggles. Some of you have health concerns; relationship problems; financial troubles. It's all been weighing heavy on you. So, it wouldn't shock me if the primary emotion you're feeling is discouragement or despair; frustration or exasperation; anger or annoyance. **I think those feelings are understandable. But according to our verse, they're not excusable.**
  - You should be forewarned that our verse this morning contains a biblical command that has the potential to crush your spirit. But it possesses a greater power to lift you up – out of the pits, out of the gloom and misery of your present context – and to a place of genuine gratitude, with a true spirit of thankfulness to the Lord.
  
- ❖ Turn your attention to 1 Thessalonians 5. Paul is writing to the church of Thessalonica. As with most of his letters, he ends with a number of apostolic commands. Earlier, we heard it read beginning in v9. Right now, I just want to read three related commands in vv16-18, but we're just going to focus on the last one in v18.

- ❖ Listen now, “<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.*” **I want to make three observations from v18 that have the potential to crush a weary soul. But I do this because I know that God’s Word only crushes in order to heal.**
  - Notice the continual nature of all three commands – *always, without ceasing, in all circumstances*. There’s no break; no reprieve; no exceptions. So when it comes to giving thanks, it’s expected all the time. **We’re talking about a ceaseless gratitude.** Considering the circumstances we’re in – that’s a hard ask. That feels like an impossible command. Like I said, this verse can crush your spirit.
    - **But remember, though God bruises the reed, he won’t break it. Though he lets the wick smolder, he won’t snuff it out** (Isa 42:3). So, I do hope you feel the heavy weight of this verse, but more so, I hope you find rest under a pillar of hope latent in this verse.

### **Ceaseless Gratitude is not a Choice**

- ❖ The first observation in v18 is that this **(1) Ceaseless gratitude is not a choice.** Paul makes it clear that being grateful is not a recommendation. It’s not just good advice. **Giving thanks is not just God’s best for you – it’s his will for you.** It’s his command. His will doesn’t just express his desire but his demand.
  - So that means if you’re *not* thankful right now, you’re in opposition to God’s will. If you’re not grateful this morning, you’re disobeying the will of God. That’s heavy. Like I said, this is a crushing verse. There’s no choice here. Just a command.
- ❖ Now I know some will react to v18 and think, “Okay, what’s so hard about that? If God wants me to be grateful, if he’s commanding me to give thanks – then I’ll just get on my knees and give thanks. I’ll do it. I’ll obey.”
  - **But those who think this command is easily obeyed – fail to understand the very nature of gratitude.** Gratitude is not a choice – in the sense that it’s not an act of the will. You can’t make yourself grateful by choice. You can’t just say the words “*thank you*” and call that gratitude.
- ❖ The parents among us know the difference. You can train a child to say the words “*thank you*” whenever he receives a gift. But if his birthday or Christmas is around the corner and he’s been asking for that newest video game or for a brand new basketball – but instead if you give him a hand-knit sweater – you might get a dutiful “*thank you*” out of him. But you wouldn’t call that gratitude. It’s a form of obedience, but it’s not gratitude.
- ❖ **Gratitude is a matter of the heart. It’s a spontaneous feeling of joyful appreciation.** You can’t make yourself feel it. It can’t be forced. Genuine gratitude is a feeling that arises uncoerced from the heart. **So that means v18 is not just commanding us to do a certain thing – but to feel a certain way.** We really have to read v18 in light of v16. The command to “*give thanks in all circumstances*” must be read alongside the command to “*rejoice always*”. **You can’t be truly grateful to God without a glad heart towards God.**

- ❖ That's why we're saying ceaseless gratitude is not a choice. It's a command. And it's a command that we can't will ourselves to obey. It's not as simple as telling yourself, "I'm going to be grateful now." It's not a choice. Do you see how crushing this one little verse can be? Do you see how heavy it is?

### **Ceaseless Gratitude is not Circumstantial**

- ❖ Well, it doesn't get any lighter with our second observation: **(2) Ceaseless gratitude is not circumstantial.** Look back at v18 and notice how we're commanded to give thanks "*in all circumstances.*" Now I can understand if some might question if Paul really meant "*all*" to be taken literally as in all possible circumstances, including difficult, painful, or traumatic circumstances. Did he expect his readers to read that much into one little word? **Did he expect the Thessalonians to give thanks even in the worst of circumstances?**
  - We'll have to interpret this verse in the context of the entire letter. And based on what we learn about the present circumstances among the Thessalonians, I think it's clear that Paul really meant "*all*" as in all possible circumstances.
- ❖ Let's look at the start of this letter. Turn with me to **chapter 1:6**. Here Paul commends the Thessalonians by saying, "*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.*" So apparently the Thessalonians were experiencing severe affliction when Paul came preaching the gospel.
  - Now turn to **chapter 2:14**. Here Paul elaborates on the nature of this affliction. "*For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews.*" So his readers were being persecuted by their own unbelieving neighbors.
    - And we know from **Acts 17**, when Paul first visited Thessalonica, that he was run out of town by an angry mob that attacked the house he was staying in. And then the newly-converted Thessalonians were dragged from their homes and brought before authorities.
- ❖ **So the context paints for us a clear picture of religious persecution.** The Thessalonians were being mistreated and marginalized by their neighbors. They were being oppressed and suppressed by governing authorities. **Knowing this makes what we read in chapter 1:6 all the more surprising – that these believers received the gospel (and all the accompanying trials) with joy!**
  - So when Paul ends his letter with the command to "*give thanks in all circumstances*", the Thessalonians didn't brush it off as impossible or unreasonable. They didn't water it down to only mean *favorable* circumstances. They read it as Paul meant it. That *all* meant *all*. All circumstances – even unfavorable ones.
- ❖ But don't misinterpret his point. **Paul is not commanding us to give thanks for all circumstances.** He doesn't expect us to give thanks *for* the trials themselves. It's like how we saw in James 1 – where we're told to count it all joy *when* we meet trials of various kinds. We're to rejoice for *the occasion* of a trial – not for the trial itself.

- ❖ **That’s why v18 says to give thanks *in* all circumstances – not *for* all circumstances.** In other words, the object of your gratitude – the source of those feelings of joyful appreciation – is *not* the bad circumstance itself. You don’t have to like all your circumstances. There are some you can legitimately dislike. You can hate cancer. You can despise racial injustice. You can be sick of this pandemic. **Let’s be clear: Paul is not asking you to be grateful *for* these legitimately bad circumstances.** But when you find yourself *in* these circumstances, he does expect you to be (as he is himself) “*sorrowful yet always rejoicing*” (2 Cor 6:10).
- ❖ **So that might lighten the load of this verse just a bit – for those of you who thought that the Bible was minimizing the severity of sickness or suffering.** Making light of the pain or loss we feel when we experience unemployment; or a break up or divorce; or the death of a loved one. It’s a relief to know that we’re not being commanded to tell God, “*Thank you for this disease that is ravaging my body. Thank you for the end of my marriage. Thank you for the death of my child.*” That would be cruel and heartless.
  - But even with that important clarification – this is still a very heavy verse with a heavy expectation to still feel gratitude in such circumstances. **This gratitude commanded in our verse is to be ceaseless and not circumstantial.** That means in season *and* out. In good times *and* bad. In comfort *and* affliction. We are to give thanks to the Lord.

### **Ceaseless Gratitude is not Found in You**

- ❖ But considering the trials we’re facing as a nation and the personal trials you may be going through, I can understand if you’re not feeling much gratitude towards God. You might be emotionally numb. Or if you are feeling something towards him – it might be doubt, distrust, maybe even anger. But gratitude? How are we expected to feel ceaseless gratitude?
  - This leads to our third observation, which I believe will be a huge relief. Friends, the verse is clear that **(3) Ceaseless gratitude was never expected to be found in you.** Paul understands that true gratitude is not something you can simply will into existence. It’s not something that comes natural to us. If we look into the heart of man, we’ll find ingratitude, entitlement, suspicion, fear, etc. Not thankfulness.
- ❖ But there are three words in v18 that offer a pillar of hope for the weary soul – a pillar that will enable you to stand up under the crushing weight of his command to “*give thanks in all circumstances*”. Those three words are “*in Christ Jesus*”. This ceaseless gratitude is the will of God for you *in Christ Jesus*. **God only wills this kind of thankfulness in relation to Christ.** Apart from Christ, we are too sinful to feel how we ought to feel towards God.
  - **So that means the only way to feel a ceaseless gratitude in all circumstances is by fulfilling this command “*in Christ Jesus*”.** That means we attempt to fulfill this command in light of Christ – in light of what he has done. As a Christian, we are enabled to give thanks in all circumstances because Christ has done something for us. And what has he done for us?

- ❖ To put it simply: **Christ has given us a future – one that we can look forward to with true gratitude.** No matter your life circumstance – no matter how good or bad it is – if you are in Christ Jesus, you have a far better future to look forward to.
  - That's the one ray of hope that Paul consistently shines throughout this letter. **If you get the chance to read 1 Thessalonians for yourself, you'll notice that every chapter ends with a reference to the future** (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:17; 5:23). Specifically to the coming of the Lord, to a future day of the Lord (5:2) when Christ will return to establish his kingdom and make all things new. That's exactly what a suffering church needs to hear. That'll give them a reason to be grateful. **Now there are at least three things that Christ will bring, that Paul mentions in his letter.**
  
- ❖ **On that day, Christ will bring retribution.** He will establish perfect justice on this earth. In his first coming, Jesus humbled himself, took on the role of a servant, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God highly exalted him. So that, in his second coming, Christ will appear as King and Judge of the living and the dead. **And on that day, his holy wrath (his righteous anger) will be poured out against all expressions of sin and injustice.** Paul refers to this coming wrath in chapter 1:10 and then again in chapter 2:16 – where he says the wrath of God has come to those who persecute the Thessalonians.
  - Do you see what Paul's doing? **He's giving suffering Christians hope in the promise that perfect justice will one day prevail.** Even though, in this life, they've been wrongly persecuted and they've suffered at the hands of the wicked – they can still rejoice and be grateful, looking forward to the day Jesus brings perfect justice.
  
- ❖ **I can't see any other way to be grateful in this season of societal unrest.** Our nation is reeling after yet another police-related shooting. And it has sparked more protests and further violence and killing. And predictably, there's so much back and forth arguing over who is really to blame and what's the real cause of all this tension.
  - There are so many viewpoints. So many arguments. It's feels exhausting. It's overwhelming. There is so much hate. So much wrongdoing. So much violence. How can we possibly give thanks? How can we possibly be grateful in times like these?
  
- ❖ Church, it's only possible in Christ Jesus. **No one should be thankful for these circumstances, but in these circumstances, we hold on to the belief that Christ is coming again.** And on that day, the guilty will be exposed and perfect justice will be served. We can be grateful – knowing there will be a day when the wrath of God will burn away all the evil and injustice in this world. And all the wrongs that grieve us now will be set right.
  
- ❖ And that's not all. **According to 1 Thessalonians 4, on that day, Christ will bring a reunion.** He will reunite believers who are still alive with those who have died in him. That was Paul's point starting in chapter 4:13. Some of the Thessalonians were grieving over the death of those who had fallen asleep in Christ (meaning they died trusting in Christ). So Paul reminds them that, when Jesus returns, he will bring with him their lost loved ones who died as believers. And there will be a sweet reunion in the clouds.

- Listen to chapter 4:14, “*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.*” In light of what Christ has done (because he died and rose again), we have reason to be thankful, even when we lose the ones we love.
  
- ❖ I know some of you are still mourning the loss your spouse; or a child; or a family member or friend who died trusting in the Lord. **It’s only right that you grieve, but you don’t have to grieve as others do who have no hope.** Because of Christ Jesus, you have a reunion to look forward to.
  - You will see again that brother or sister who died in Christ. They're not truly gone. They've just gone ahead of you. You'll be catching up soon. You'll see their face. You'll feel their embrace. Everything sad right now will come untrue. No one should ever give thanks for death – but Christians can give thanks in the face of death.
  
- ❖ But what’s even better than retribution over enemies or reuniting with friends – what makes us more grateful is that **on that day, Christ will bring full redemption.** If you repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior – you can rightly speak of *having been saved*. At the moment of your conversion – the moment you first believed – you became a new creation, a child of God, a Christian. We speak of that salvation in the past tense.
  - But though Christ has paid sin's penalty for us and freed us from sin's power – the remnants of sin's presence still reside in us. That why, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we would say we are *still being saved*. And one day – on the day of the Lord – ***we will be saved***. In the future tense.
    - On that day, the unbelieving world will be purged by the fires of God's holy wrath. **But his people (the redeemed) are destined not to suffer wrath but to enjoy salvation.** Listen to chapter 5:9, "*For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"
  
- ❖ The death Jesus died on the cross, in our place, satisfied God's holy wrath. His wrath never burns twice in the same place. So as long as we are in Christ Jesus – if we’re hiding in him – we're safe. On that final day of judgment, we won't suffer wrath.
  - **Instead, we’ll experience salvation – the fullness of our redemption.** For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now we know in part; then we shall know fully, even as we have been fully known (1 Cor 13:12). And we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 Jn 3:2)
  
- ❖ So you see, when Paul commands our gratitude even in the midst of sorrowful circumstances, he’s not trying to make light of our sorrows. **He’s trying to place our sorrows in light of the cross.** Because of what Christ has done for us *in the past* – and will do for us *in the future* – we have every reason to be grateful and to give thanks in all circumstances. **That spontaneous feeling of joyful appreciation – that comes from having a clear view of what's to come. Of that terrifying yet glorious day of the Lord.**

- ❖ On July 4, 1952, **Florence Chadwick** was determined to become the first woman to swim from Catalina Island to mainland California – a mind-blowing twenty-one miles through rough ocean waves. But the fog was so thick she could hardly see her support boats.
  - After fifteen straight hours of swimming, Chadwick strained her eyes forward, desperately searching for land. But all she could see around her was a thick, soupy fog. And at this point, weary with exhaustion, all she could think about was quitting.
  
- ❖ She held the world record for the fastest time across the English Channel, so she was a celebrity. Millions of viewers were watching on national television hoping to see another record. But fifteen hours in, she was past her breaking point. Staring into the fog, she lost all hope and asked to be pulled out.
  - Once she was safely on a boat, she learned that the shore was less than half a mile away. At a news conference, as she reflected on her decision to quit, Chadwick explained, *“All I could see was the fog. Look, I’m not excusing myself, but I think that if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.”*
  
- ❖ **Friends, I think the reason we struggle with ceaseless gratitude is because our eyes have lost sight of the shore.** There's too much fog in our lives. It's all we see. So when we come across these biblical commands for endurance and perseverance – to rejoice always, to pray unceasingly, to give thanks in all circumstances – **they end up feeling like heavy weights that are dragging us down to the ocean floor.** If all you can see is the fog, then I'm not surprised if you're ready to give up on v18.
  - But the gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected; ascended and seated at the right hand of God; coming back again to bring retribution, reunion, and full redemption – **this good news is like a beam of light breaking through the clouds, scattering the fog, revealing the shore, giving us a glimpse of that great day of the Lord.**
  
- ❖ The key is to stay in the light, as he is in the light. Always keeping the gospel front and center. **That's why, in addition to preaching straight through books of the Bible, here at HCC we also value preaching the gospel in every sermon.** We want to keep shining the good news of Jesus Christ into your eyes every week, to scatter the fog, and to help you see the shore.
  
- ❖ **But remember, that shore will only be inviting if you are safely found in Christ as your Lord and Savior.** Otherwise, it'll be like swimming towards the beaches of Normandy under German occupation. There will only be wrath and judgment awaiting you on shore. If you're not in Christ, then the day of the Lord will be a day of condemnation for you.
  - **The trials of this life will be the least of your worries if you have not found safety in Christ.** So I urge you to place your trust in him, to run to him for rescue. And why not today? Why wait another day and prolong your anxiety and uncertainty over the future? Today your future can change – which will make you hopeful. And that will transform how you see your present circumstances – which will make you grateful.