

ALWAYS GIVING THANKS

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 5:19-20)

Happy Thanksgiving! Does everyone know who Snoopy the Dog is? Once he tried to be thankful on Thanksgiving Day. He got dog food for his Thanksgiving Day Dinner but he was aware that everyone else in the family was inside having turkey. He thought about it and said, "Hey how about that? Everyone is eating turkey today, but just because I'm a dog I get dog food." He sulked and positioned himself on top of his doghouse. Soon he concluded, Well, I guess it could have been worse. I could have been born a turkey..."

As I mentioned this weekend is a special holiday weekend in Canada. We celebrate a holiday called Thanksgiving. Usually friends and family gather to enjoy a huge turkey dinner with potatoes, stuffing, cranberries, and pumpkin pie. It is really delicious. But the true spirit of Thanksgiving isn't about the food. It's about giving thanks to the Creator God for everything He has given us. In this sense, Thanksgiving has a really long history, beginning with the first family on earth when Cain and Abel presented their thanksgiving offerings to God (Genesis 4). Since then God commanded his people to celebrate a form of Thanksgiving in various ways such as the Passover, the Feast of

Tabernacles, and the Feast of Weeks. Today, Canada and the US celebrate with turkey. But that's not so important. Webster's dictionary defines Thanksgiving as "a public acknowledgment or celebration of divine goodness." What's really important is that we give thanks to God for everything in our life. It's more than a day. It's a lifestyle and general attitude we should have before God.

If I asked you to make a list of the things you are thankful for over the past year, what you say? I guess Sam would say that he received his first pay check from work today. Maybe Daniel would say he got a new scholarship and did well during his first term. When we think about it, actually we have many blessings from God. We all have apartments to live in and enough food to eat. The streets of Japan are safe to walk. Children can play freely at the park. We have lots of drinking water. The air is good to breathe. We are generally healthy. We have life. The mountains and ocean around us are beautiful. All these things come from God. God is the creator of everything and the source of our life. When we think about God's blessings to us the list seems to never end. Everything we have is God's blessing.

The great politician and speaker, Cicero, once said that a thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all other virtues. Indeed, thankfulness is the root of so many good aspects of our life. When we are thankful, we feel joy, peace, desire to work hard, persevere, hope, etc. But when we are unthankful, we become very dark. We feel bitter, anger, despair,

and want to give up. The Bible teaches that unthankfulness is the root of all evil. But thankfulness is the mark of a true Christian or godly person. So as God's people we need to learn how to be thankful always.

But as we know, sometimes it isn't easy to be thankful. Sometimes we are in difficult situations and it seems like we can't be thankful. However, it is in this kind of situation that Thanksgiving originally started in North America. The pilgrims had left Europe to travel to the US. They traveled more than two months across the Atlantic Ocean fighting against deadly conditions. Many of them didn't make it and many loved ones were lost. Totally unprepared for a harsh winter in the Eastern US nearly half of them died of starvation and sickness before spring. It is hard to imagine how they felt in such tragedy and suffering. Yet in 1621, they celebrated the first Thanksgiving Feast with the Native Americans. Even though the situation was hard, the pilgrims gave thanks to God. The pilgrims could have looked at themselves or their environment and despaired. But instead they saw God who was opening the door to make a new world history in America. The pilgrims' struggle to be thankful even in adverse situations is truly inspiring to us.

Let's read Ephesians 5:19-20 again. "**Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**"

These verses are part of the letter which Paul wrote for the early Christians in Ephesus while he was in prison in Rome. Apostle Paul had been preaching the gospel and establishing numerous churches in Asia Minor and Europe. He worked very hard, harder than any other Christian or apostle in his time. Humanly speaking, he definitely deserved praise and recognition for his remarkable achievement. At the very least, he should've spent the last days of his life in a quiet and cozy retirement home with a fast internet connection and many movies. Yet, Paul spent most of his last years in a cold prison cell. Though he had done nothing wrong, he was beat severely and imprisoned several times. If anyone had a right to be bitter about the way his life was going, it was Apostle Paul himself. But instead of grumbling about the bad human situation he was in, he was always filled with the spirit of praise and thanksgiving toward God. He wrote, "**Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" Paul challenges us to give thanks to God from our hearts, not just one day but always, for everything.

What was the secret to Paul's thankfulness? Did he memorize a long list of online self-help books? Was he just a really strong guy? Let's look more closely at what Paul wrote, "...**always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" The secret to Paul's

thankfulness was Jesus. Paul was a Pharisee which meant he had the highest level of education of the time. He was an outstanding scholar and member of society and had a great passion to serve God. But one day he met the Risen Jesus. Jesus forgave all his sins and gave him the promise of God's kingdom. Paul had been persecuting the Christian church because he believed they were wrong. But Jesus extended his one-sided mercy and grace to him. Paul never forgot Jesus' grace. He wrote to Timothy, **"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."** (1 Tim 1:15) Here, Paul addressed Jesus as the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was humble and accepted Jesus' lordship over his life. Paul knew that whatever happened to him was because of Jesus and for Jesus. Paul's life certainly wasn't going as he planned. When he was young, maybe he dreamed to be successful. Now in his old age, he was in prison even though he did nothing wrong. He could wonder: "What am I doing with my life? It seems like everything is being wasted." But instead of despairing, Paul used these trials as discipline to learn how to give thanks to God always. Especially, he learned not to compare his situation to others but to come to Jesus. In Jesus, Paul found encouragement to persevere. In Jesus, Paul found hope in the Kingdom of God when there was no hope in the things of this world. In Jesus, Paul was comforted because of God's love and faithfulness who even gave us his own Son for us on the cross. Usually we are swayed by the

situation. When things are going well, we are happy. But when they go wrong, we complain and become bitter. The only way to be thankful always is to remember what Jesus did for sinners like us. Jesus died on the cross so our sins could be forgiven. His blood poured out so we could have a personal relationship with God. When we remember this grace of Jesus and the promise of salvation, we are thankful no matter what happens.

In Acts 16, we can read about Paul's imprisonment in Philippi. There was a young girl who was being used by her boss to make money through fortune telling. When she saw Paul preaching, she followed him and shouted, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for several days and was disrupting Paul's ministry. Paul realized she was possessed by an evil spirit. Out of love, he finally turned around and said to her, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her and she was completely free and healed. That in itself is a beautiful story. But when the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope for making money through her was gone, they seized Paul and his friend Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They began to accuse them as Jewish troublemakers. When the crowd heard, they joined in the attack. The police chief ordered them to be stripped and beaten, and after they had been severely flogged, they were thrown in prison. What would you do if you were Paul?

"Would you yell, life isn't fair! I did nothing to deserve this. Get me out of this prison! Give me a better life!" But Acts 16:25 says that around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Instead of feeling bitterness, Paul gave thanks to God -- in a prison cell. The other prisoners were in despair. But Paul began using his chains as a musical instrument and sang, "Give thanks with a grateful heart. Give thanks to the Holy One. Give thanks because he's given Jesus Christ our Lord." The other prisoners must have thought Paul was crazy from all the beating. But Paul wasn't crazy. Paul could sing hymns like this because he had the grace of Jesus in his heart.

Still, sometimes we may wonder why God brings these hardships. Why should good people suffer? Recently, we heard the news of the terrible floods in the Philippines caused by the tropical storm Ketsana. We also heard about the huge earthquakes in Indonesia and ongoing violence and suffering in countries like Afghanistan. Japan had a typhoon this past week. The economic situation isn't good now and many people are without jobs. We may have personal problems or family problems. If God loves us, why doesn't he make our lives easier?

On the internet, I read a story about a boy who watched a butterfly struggling to get out of its cocoon. He felt so sorry for it. So in an effort to help it, he took a razor blade, and carefully slit the edge of the cocoon. You know what happened? The butterfly

escaped from its problem, but then it died immediately. The boy didn't understand that it is God's way to have the butterfly struggle so that the fluids can move from his body to his wings and develop properly before flying. Trials have their purpose. They make us struggle so that we may become stronger. Romans 5:3-5 reads, **"And we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."**

Our faith is often tested. But thanksgiving is the barometer of the depth of our faith. Faith and thanksgiving go hand in hand. If we have faith in God, we will be thankful because we know God's loving hand is upon us, even though we are in the valley of the shadow of death, in a lion's den or in the furnace of fire. We can be confident when we know that God is still with us and in us when we suffer, molding us into something very beautiful and precious, like jewels of heaven. It's not natural for us to have the spirit of thanksgiving in times of adversity. We instantly complain. Therefore, we need to be disciplined to give thanks to God.

When I thought back to the past year, I thought of many things to be thankful for. For example, our family could move to Japan. God kept our family safe and healthy and also worked in the ministry. But to be honest sometimes it wasn't easy to be thankful. As the pastor of a church, I had

many new responsibilities and sometimes felt overwhelmed and burdened. I also hoped to get a software development job in Oita, but God closed all the doors and so I was led to teach English. For one year we didn't make enough money to support ourselves. Finally, for the first time since coming to Japan, this month I should receive a salary which will cover our basic costs. I should have been thankful. But instead in my heart I grumbled because teaching at the preschool isn't easy. The children cry a lot, I need to change many diapers, and I suffer under the strict discipline of the school owners. When I imagined my life in Japan I didn't think I would be doing this. It was hard to accept it as God's way.

But this week's verses touched my heart. **"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."** Paul struggled and was able to make music in his heart to God even though he was in prison. Even though the path which God leads me is different than the one I hope for, still I can be happy and give thanks like Paul. The secret is Jesus. Jesus didn't want to die on the cross. But he did it so you and I could be saved. When I deeply think about what Jesus did for me, I am thankful to God.

I hope that this Thanksgiving will be more than just a gathering and meal together. I hope it will be a time to meditate and give thanks to God for all the aspects of our lives.

Some of us may be in difficult situations now. It may even seem impossible to be thankful. But when we know the grace of Jesus personally, we can be thankful. I pray that today may spark a new beginning for all of us as we turn our hearts to God and always give thanks to him.