

Rev. Dan Welch Thanksgiving 11-27-24 and 11-28-24 Text- 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

Have you ever heard or used the expression “Thanks for nothing”? People say that when they’re upset with what someone did or did not do: “Hey! Thanks for nothing!”

I have to admit it’s an unusual title for a sermon and probably not what you would expect to hear on this day of national thanksgiving; a holiday in our country set aside for showing gratitude to God for every blessing of body and soul. A day for getting together with family and friends to give thanks to God for them and with them. And of course, a day to indulge in a bountiful feast of delicious turkey, potatoes, stuffing, cranberries, pie, and more. With all these things in the forefront of our minds, if it sounds as though I’m implying that we should thank God for nothing, well actually—***I am!*** Because that’s also what St. Paul is suggesting in our text when he says, “Be thankful in all circumstances.” ***All*** circumstances. Not just during good times, like today, but also in bad times and when it doesn’t seem like there’s anything at all for which to give thanks.

It’s ***easy*** to be thankful during the good times; when the circumstances are pleasant or rewarding like falling in love, getting married, the birth of a child, when someone is generous or kind to you, when friends or family whom you haven’t seen for a long-time come to visit. These are all happy times, times for rejoicing and giving thanks!

But you can be certain that when I had a pinched nerve in my back a couple of years ago and every movement I made, shot severe waves of pain throughout my body, that I was ***not*** singing a song of thanksgiving that day and, I would add, that is not what God would ***expect*** of me—or you—whenever we are in the midst of pain or sorrow.

God does not expect you to be thankful ***for*** times of misery or even for bland, uneventful times. To thank God ***for*** the difficult times in one’s life implies God is somehow responsible for the dark times in our lives. God is not responsible for our problems. It is far more likely that we’ve brought the problems on ourselves, or someone else has, or life in this sinful, fallen world is the culprit. Sin and Satan are colossal forces! But God is never the author of anything bad or evil.

Whatever the source of our problems, the message is the same—we ***can*** give thanks ***in*** all circumstances, not necessarily ***for*** all circumstances, but ***in*** all circumstances, we can give thanks! ***But, how*** can we be thankful at ***all*** times, especially during ***hard, challenging*** times?

To help explain, I would like you to picture in your mind being outside in your yard on a dark night with the yard light or streetlight on and you suddenly

see something that alarms you. It's a shadow up against the wall of your house or garage, or maybe picture yourself in a strange, unfamiliar parking lot. That shadow that you see in your mind wherever it may be is a symbol for all of those dark times in life when you go through crises or depression, we suffer the problems we create for ourselves or others create for us. The shadow represents worries and heartaches. Your shadow up against that wall also symbolizes the darkness of sin against which all of us have to fight. The Gospel of John is filled with words and phrases that identify sin as darkness.

Whatever the darkness symbolizes for **you**, it is generally not experienced as pleasant. When we're in the midst of these unpleasant, painful, and dark circumstances of our life, there is only one way we can be thankful. There is only one way we can praise God; namely, to be certain that wherever and whenever there is a shadow, there is also a **light**. There can never be a shadow unless there is light. In other words, there can never be dark, shadowy, painful times in our lives without the presence of God's reassuring light.

If you turn and face your shadow, where is the light? Behind you. This is all very obvious when it comes to tangible lights and shadows we can see. But it's not so obvious when we talk spiritual matters.

The reason why it seems so ridiculous to talk about giving thanks in the midst of difficult circumstances is because we turn away from the light of Christ and focus entirely on the shadow. When all we see is the darkness of our problems, of course we are going to be overwhelmed and feel like God has abandoned us. It is not helpful or wise to stare at the shadowy darkness in our life unless we remember that the light of Christ is right behind us to support us in the work of overcoming sin and other forms of darkness in our lives.

When we're aware of the light of Christ and are receiving His warmth, strength, and understanding, which the light of Christ will give to us, then we **can** give thanks at these times. We don't give thanks **for** the actual pain or suffering, as I mentioned. We may at some point down the road in the future, when we see how God actually can and does work all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Ro 8:28). But at the time we're **going through** the darkness or facing our shadow, we are giving thanks for the light of Christ and **His** constant and comforting presence.

Unless the Lord Jesus returns first - and our earnest prayer should always be that He does - each of us will someday walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We can overcome the fear of darkness by the grace of God as we take in the light of Christ: the light that is in His Word, the light that is in the Lord's Supper, the light of Christian fellowship and worship. With that much

light of God surrounding us, then we can both face the darkness in our lives and give thanks to God who sustains us.

With God's help we can give thanks in good and joyful times like this holiday, but also on the days of darkness, because Jesus Christ, the Light of the World is with us always. Because of Him we *always* have so much to be thankful for! Happy Thanksgiving! Amen