

BEING THANKFUL EVEN IN BAD TIMES

Good morning! How was your Thanksgiving? I hope it was a good one! This is still Thanksgiving weekend and so I thought I'd share a Thanksgiving message and jokes. Let me ask you a question: Why did the turkey cross the road? It was Thanksgiving Day, and he wanted people to think he was a chicken. Then, there's the turkey who lamented to another turkey, "Dude! I started a Twitter account last year and was glad to gather a ton of online followers. But, this Thanksgiving they all want to have me over for dinner!" Turkeys go through bad times, too, not only people.

Seriously, life is not easy. Anybody in pain has a hard time being grateful. How can you be thankful if the doctor just told you it's cancer? How can you be thankful if the person you loved the most just walked in and said, "I don't love you anymore; I'm leaving you for somebody else." How can you be thankful when you have a chronic illness that just isn't getting any better? How can you be thankful when you've been laid off and you've gone to fourteen job interviews and they've all turned you down? How can you be thankful when your dream has collapsed? Or the economic tsunami just wiped out everything you've earned in your life time?

Yet the Bible tells us to always be thankful. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, the verse on your outline, it says this *"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* It's a command from God. And it's his will for each of us.

Now, the key to this verse is the little word "in". God doesn't expect you to be grateful *for* everything in your life. It says "in everything". Because there's a lot of bad in your life, a lot of evil, a lot of sin in the world. It would be stupid, it would be masochistic to be grateful for sin and the suffering it causes.

I'm not grateful when somebody gets leukemia or lupus. I'm not grateful when a woman is raped or a child is molested. I'm not grateful when there are wars. I'm not grateful when there's racial profiling and people are prejudiced and bigoted against because of their race. I'm not grateful when there's injustice in the world.

In fact, the Bible says there are some things you ought to get mad about. You ought to get angry. Anger is often an evidence of love. If somebody hurt my kids I'd get angry. That's an evidence of love. God gets angry when he sees evil in the world.

So the Bible doesn't say be thankful for everything. That would make God a tyrant. But the Bible says "*...in everything give thanks.*" In whatever situation you're in, give thanks. Why? Because even in the darkest times, in the worst periods of desperation, even when my life is totally falling apart, there's always some good things that I can thank God for.

Some people are never grateful. A woman's grandson is playing in the water, she is standing on the beach not wanting to get her feet wet, when all of a sudden, a huge wave appears from nowhere and crashes directly over the spot where the boy is wading.

The water recedes and the boy is no longer there. He simply vanishes. She holds her hands to the sky, screams and cries, "Lord, how could you? Have I not been a wonderful mother and grandmother? Have I not given to people when they had need? Have I not tried my very best to live a life that you would be proud of?"

A few minutes later another huge wave appears out of nowhere and crashes on the beach. As the water recedes, the boy is standing there, smiling, splashing around as if nothing has ever happened.

A loud voice booms from the sky, "Okay, okay, I have returned your grandson. Are you grateful?"

She responds, "He had a hat."

So how can I be grateful when I don't feel like it? How can I be thankful even in bad times? You look at the things you can always be thankful for. The Bible gives us **four things you can always be grateful for**. I'd like to share with you these four things. For sure, there are so many more, but I thought these four should be on top of anyone's list.

So what are the things I can always thank God for?

1. The Bible says I can always be thankful for the grace God shows me.

I can be thankful for the grace that God shows to me. What is grace? Grace is when God gives me what I need, not what I deserve. Grace is when God gives me what I don't deserve.

You see, everything in your life is a gift of God's grace. The air you're breathing right now is a gift of God's grace. You don't own it, you don't buy it, you don't deserve it. The next beat of your heart is a gift of God's grace. The Bible says every good and perfect gift, everything in your life you owe to God. Even your own life. He gave you your mind, he gave you your sight, he gave you your hearing, he gave you your voice. Everything in your life is a gift of God. And if God hadn't decided to create you to love you then you wouldn't exist.

So it's all by God's grace. And you know what, the most important thing that God has given you by his grace is your salvation. The Bible says in **Ephesians 2:8** *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—"*

I can't earn my way to heaven, I can't work my way to heaven, I can't buy my way into heaven, I can't bargain my way into heaven. It is just a flat out gift of God's grace. Do you earn it? No. You receive it. It is a gift. Salvation is a gift you receive. And the only thing you have to do is believe. You have to believe that Jesus Christ came and died for your sins, paid for your ticket to heaven. That's it. You didn't do anything. It was all done by Jesus.

On the cross he cries out, “*It is finished,*” in other words, he says, “I paid for your salvation. It’s all a gift.”

In Psalm 103 David gives us a list of the gifts of God’s grace. Can you please turn to your Bibles and open to Psalm 103. The Psalmist begins with “**Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—**“ Can you give me some of God’s benefits?

So, you see, if I got what I deserved in life, my rebellion against God, my trying to be God, my playing God, my saying I don’t need God, I wouldn’t even exist. I can always be thankful for grace, the grace that God shows me every single second of my life. I don’t deserve anything. God gave me this next second of my life. And if he didn’t want me to have it I wouldn’t have it. So I’m grateful for the grace that God shows me every moment of my life.

2. I can always be thankful for the plans God has for me.

I can always be thankful for the plans God has for me. Because God has good plans for my life, for your life.

It’s very obvious that life is not always good. A lot of things that happen in life are bad. They’re painful. They’re difficult. Life is tough. That’s why some people don’t have a positive attitude toward life. They’re always negative. You see, probably nothing can contribute more to the quality of our lives than a positive attitude. And yet, sometimes it is so easy for us to become critical. And we end up focusing on the negatives.

It’s like the wife who bought her husband two new neckties. He was so appreciative that he immediately went to his room and put one of them on. Then he came out to show it to her. She took one look at him wearing the new tie and said, “What’s the matter? Don’t you like the other one?”

Although life disappoints us, although life is not always good, God is always good. And God’s plan for your life is always good.

The Bible says: *“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”* (Jer. 29:11) Isn’t that a good plan?

Let me compare your life to a cruise line. Let’s say we got on a cruise, you and me, we got on the cruise and we go from Florida to say, New York. That cruise ship is headed toward New York but while we’re on that cruise ship, like your life, you have a lot of free choices. You have a free will; it’s just not completely free. You have limited free will.

So for instance, on that cruise line you could eat all seven buffets. I wouldn’t advise it but you could. And stay up for the midnight buffet and all that too. You could go play shuffleboard – I don’t know why anybody would want to but you could. Or you could go dancing. You could play some slot machines most likely. You could sleep the whole time. There are a lot of things you could do on a cruise ship. But no matter what you do on that ship, it’s going to New York. And nothing’s going to change it. It is the captain’s job to get it to New York, not your job.

God has a plan for your life and once you put your hand in Christ’s hand he says I’m going to get you to heaven. Whether you realize it or not it’s not in your hands any more. There are times you may want to let go of God’s hand but God’s not going to let go of yours because you put your hand in his by putting your faith in Christ. Like the captain’s job of getting us to New York it’s God’s job to get you to heaven. It doesn’t depend on you. Can you be grateful for that? If I worked to earn my salvation, then anytime I stop working, the salvation would stop working. But I don’t earn my salvation, it is the gift of God’s grace. I put my hand in his and I accept it through Christ. Then he’s going to hold on my hand for the rest of the cruise line.

But on our way to heaven, sometimes, tragedy strikes. When tragedy strikes, when your life falls apart, when everything goes wrong the typical thing we want to do is look for an explanation. However, explanations never, ever comfort. They don't really help you at all. So don't waste time in trying to find out the Why? First, my brain isn't big enough to understand all that happens in the world and neither is yours. It's like an ant trying to understand the internet. There are a lot of things in your life you're just not going to know why they happen until you get to heaven.

What you need when you're going through a tough time is not an explanation. What you need is the presence of God. Romans 8:28. *"We know that in all things [not some things] **"We know that in all things God works for the GOOD of those who love him [who give him the broken pieces of their lives], who have been called according to his purpose."***

So I know that no matter what I go through if I will give those pieces to God, God's going to bring good out of it. He loves to turn crucifixions into resurrections and then bless the whole world by it. Have you ever thought about how God might want to bless the world through your pain?

I can be thankful to God because I know I'm always thankful for the grace God shows me, and I'm always thankful for the plans God has for me.

3. I can always be thankful for God's promise to never leave me.

I want you to think about this for just a second, this truth. There is not a moment in your life that God isn't with you. There's not a moment in life that God isn't with you. He's watching you. That is actually a powerful, powerful truth.

Look at what God says to us in Hebrews 13:5. God says this, ***"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*** God will never leave us, he will never abandon us. But here's the wonderful part of that promise.

That Scripture isn't there to coerce us into staying out of trouble. It's actually there to comfort us in times of trouble. What a difference! There's not a moment in your life, there's not a situation you find yourself in, there's not a depth of experience, a sense of loss or loneliness we could ever travel alone. God's always with us. He never ever leaves us.

And you know what? There's no fine print. Sometimes when we read those verses we go, Where's the catch? Where's the hook?

Have you ever seen the commercials on drugs on television? It might be a thirty second drug commercial. Twenty-five seconds it's telling you the good side of the drug, what the drug will do for you. Then the next five seconds, in express mode, all the fine print, all the explanation – the side effects.

There's no fine print in God's promise to always be with us. And he will never ever leave us. Period.

Look at this verse in Isaiah 43:2 (NLT). It says this ***“When you go through deep waters, I will be with you! When you pass through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; it will NOT consume you!”***

I'm not sure what deep waters you've gone through this year. I'm not sure what fires you felt consumed you. Maybe there's been a husband or a wife, a mother or a father, a friend, a co-worker that has walked out on you. And you felt abandoned. You felt alone. Maybe you've just gone through stuff as a family where you felt like, “God, are you really with us now? Are we walking through this situation by ourselves?” Maybe you're dealing with a difficult health problem and it seems it's getting worse. Will I ever make it? The answer is a resounding YES! God promises us that he'll never ever leave us. His presence will always be with you.

I remember when I joined Youth With A Mission as a short-term missionary. I left my job in Australia, flew to Hawaii for training and virtually was penniless. I had already paid for my training which included food and lodging. However, there were things I needed to buy on a daily basis. Like my snacks, school supplies, and personal stuff like soap, shampoo, razor, toothbrush, etc. I had very little cash but I wasn't worried because I had lots of friends in Australia and I expected them to support me. They assured me of that. And that's when I found out what a missionary life is all about. In all my two months of training, no one, literally not even one of them sent me any money. I wanted to message them but there was no Facebook yet.

How did I survive? God used a Japanese guy, Hiroo is his name, who I became close friends with. I didn't expect he could help because he was a trainee like me and for sure, whatever money he had was just good enough for his own needs. But he did help. He was so kind and generous that he shared some of his money with me. Not only that, he gave me some Japanese massage, too. You know, shiatsu. When I thought everyone else abandoned me, God came through and showed he cared by using someone who I least expected to help me.

I'm not sure what has you worried this Thanksgiving. But one of the best ways for us to be thankful is to recognize God's promise that he'll never leave us. Even during those times when we feel like he doesn't care, God really does and he's always watching over us. We just need to trust his heart.

I read the story of a little boy who was eagerly looking forward to the birthday party of a friend who lived only a few blocks away. When the day finally arrived, a blizzard made the sidewalks and roads nearly impassable. The boy's father, sensing the danger, hesitated to let his son go. The youngster reacted tearfully. "But Dad," he pleaded, "all the other kids will be there. Their parents are letting them go." The father thought for a moment, then replied softly, "All right, you may go."

Surprised but overjoyed, the boy bundled up and plunged into the raging storm. The driving snow made visibility almost impossible, and it took him about half an hour to trudge the short distance to the party.

As he rang the doorbell, he turned briefly to look out into the storm. His eye caught the shadow of a retreating figure. It was his father. He had followed his son's every step to make sure he arrived safely.

God is your heavenly Father. He's always watching over you to make sure you make it through life. He is faithful.

One powerful way we can have faith even in times we're going through crisis, going through loss, is to pray a prayer of Thanksgiving. That's what I'd like to do. I'd like to just pray a prayer of thanks to God right now.

As I do that, here's what I'd like you to do. I want you to think of a need you have of God today, a spot in your life where you go, "If I'm honest God I feel like you're not with me on this one. I feel like you've abandoned me here." Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, as we go through this Thanksgiving season there are times that God if we're honest, there are times and places in our lives that it's tough. It's tough to say thanks. Because God, we feel alone. Father, I'm not sure what those moments, what those areas are for my friends this morning. But God, I pray that they would sense your powerful presence in their lives. God, if they feel alone in a relationship, if they feel alone because their plans for life have just begun to fall apart and unravel. Father, whatever it is in our life, whatever our need is this moment I pray that right now we would sense your powerful loving and never wavering presence in our lives. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Look at this verse in Philippians 4:6, just as a reminder of the importance of prayer in our lives as we give thanks.

It says this *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

No matter what happens in my life I can always thank God for the grace that God shows me, for the plan that God has for me, and for the promise that he’ll never leave me.

4. I can always be thankful for the changes God is making in me.

I can be grateful for the changes that God is making in me. Here’s the good news. No matter what I go through God will use it to change me for the better. That’s part of Romans 8:28. He’s working inside me. He’s not just with me. He is actually in me and inside me he’s making changes.

Here’s the good news. While circumstances may be working against you and while other people may be working against you, the good news that I can be thankful in this, God is working in you.

Look at the next verse: *Philippians 2:13 “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”* 2 Corinthians 3:18 (TLB) says *“And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him.”* I can be grateful for that. God knows that even the bad stuff that happens in my life this year he’ll use it to make me more like Jesus. I can be thankful in that.

Truth be told, I’m not all I should be! But thank God he’s changing me. If you don’t like me right now, hang on. I’m getting better.

During that time when he’s working on us and that pain comes in our lives we often feel weak and we often feel defeated. That’s okay. That’s when God’s strength shows up best.

2 Corinthians 12:9 says, “*But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.*”

You don’t know God is all you need until God is all you’ve got. C. S. Lewis said, “He who has God and many other things has no more than he who has God alone.” When you’re out there and you have no emotional support and you have no financial support and you have no relational support and you feel like I’m in this by myself and I’m up to my nose and I’m going under soon. I’m about ready to throw in the towel. It is at that point you don’t know God is all you need until God’s all you’ve got.

Have you ever thanked God for this, the fact that while other people and circumstances are working against you that God is working in you and for you to make you a better man, to make you a better woman? Let’s stop and let’s thank God about that. One of the ways that God does this is causing us to remember the things he’s taken us through. The Bible says in Psalms 50:23 “*Giving thanks is a sacrifice that truly honors me.*” Did you know that? The Bible says that when you pause to remember what God has done in your life then it’s like a sacrifice to God. He says it honors me when you stop and say thank you. Have you done that for what he’s done in your life this year? In spite of all the bad things?

Folks, in the midst of our suffering and pain, there’s always something to thank God for. His grace, his plans for us, his presence, and the change he’s making in us. May we forever be grateful to God and thank him in all circumstances.